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AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF
SELECTED EDUCATORS AND CITIZENS TOWARD THE
MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS POLICY IN THE
TOWN OF BELLINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

A Dissertation Presented

By

FRANCIS JOSEPH CONNOR

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

September 1986

Department of Education

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ABSTRACT

An Analysis of the Perceptions of Selected Educators and Citizens Toward the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy in the Town of Bellingham, Massachusetts

September 1986

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The purpose of the research project was to assess the impact that the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy had on the perceptions of administrators, teachers, parents, and students in relation to a national movement toward competency testing. There had existed widespread concern during the past decade over the deficiencies in the basic academic skills achievement of the nation's public school students.

The research was accomplished through the utilization of in-depth open ended interviewing as well as the administration of a opinion survey. There were four distinct groups within the town of Bellingham from which information was obtained. These four groups included: (1) administrators, (2) teachers, (3) parents, (4) students. Individual interviews as well as a final group interview were conducted with selected members of the four groups. The surveys were provided to other members of those four groups.

The findings of the study were summarized as follows:

1. All respondent groups felt that a state mandated basic skills policy was necessary to help improve the achievement of public school students. The problem was perceived as national in scope, not as unique to the state of Massachusetts or the town of Bellingham.

2. There was a general consensus that since the Policy had been implemented in the town of Bellingham there were gradual, yet noticeable gains in student basic skills areas. The skill most frequently mentioned as improving was the skill of writing.

3. There existed some disagreement in regards to the Policy issue of linking graduation or promotion to the passage of the basic skills test. There was stronger agreement among the participants to tie graduation to the passage of the test, than for grade to grade promotion linkages to testing.

4. Strong areas of agreement among all four groups included exempting special needs and bilingual students, implementing the Policy at both the elementary and secondary levels, excluding the skills of listening and speaking from the testing process, and providing remedial services early and often to students who fail basic skills examinations.

5. Statewide standardization was strongly supported by teachers, parents, and students. Administrators were less convinced that statewide standards would solve the problems of equitability and comparability in the basic skills process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
Chapter	
I. THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
The Problem Statement	3
Need for the Study	5
Description of the Town and School System	8
The Massachusetts Department of Education	
Policy on Basic Skills	9
Description of Bellingham's Basic Skills	
Program	11
Statement of the Purpose	13
Significance of the Problem	18
Definition of Terms	20
II. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	23
Historical Perspective	23
Public Reaction -- Legislative Action	27
Purpose of Minimum Competency Testing	29
Definition of Minimum Competency Testing	33
Description of Model Programs	36
Criticisms of Minimum Competency Testing (MCT)	
Programs	39
Testing Issues	42
Litigation Surrounding MCT	45
Developing a Model for MCT	49
MCT and Selected Populations	53
Impact of MCT on School and Community	55
Tying MCT to High School Graduation or Promotion	57
Financial Impact	59
MCT General Issues	61
Summary and Recommendations	63
III. DESIGN OF THE STUDY	67
Rationale for the Methodology	67
Development of the Interview Guide	70
Selection of Participants	73
Research Questions	76
Description of Interview Procedures	78
Data Analysis	83
Group Interview	84
Opinion Survey Development	85

III.	DESIGN OF THE STUDY (Continued)	
	Opinion Survey Administration	90
	Inductive Analysis	92
	Categories	93
	Summary	94
IV.	PRESENTATION OF THE DATA	96
	Introduction	96
	Suitability of Establishing a Basic Skills Program	98
	Public Dissatisfaction	102
	Elementary versus Secondary Focus	105
	Skills Acquisition	108
	Effect of the Policy on Teachers and Curriculum	111
	Focus of Basic Skills Testing	118
	Promotion/Graduation Linkages to Testing	120
	Exemptions	127
	State versus Local Control	130
	Remedial Services	134
	Public Participation	137
	Future Changes	140
	The Survey Data	146
	Suitability of Establishing a Basic Skills Policy	148
	Public Dissatisfaction	151
	Elementary versus Secondary Focus	154
	Skills Acquisition	157
	Effect of the Policy on Teachers and Curriculum	158
	Focus on Basic Skills Testing	164
	Promotion/Graduation Linkages to Testing	166
	Exemptions	167
	State versus Local Control	168
	Remedial Services	170
	Public Participation	171
	Future Changes	173
	Summary	174
V.	CONCLUSIONS	175
	Need for Basic Skills Programs	175
	Design of the Study	182
	Results of the Study	184
	Specific Problem Areas	186
	Need for Basic Skills Programs	186
	Public Dissatisfaction	188
	Level of Focus	188
	Teacher and Curriculum Impact	189

V. CONCLUSIONS (Continued)

Skills Acquisition	191
Listening and Speaking	192
Promotion/Graduation	192
Exemptions/Remedial Services	194
State versus Local Control	194
Public Participation	195
Changes	196
Recommendations	196

NOTES	199
-------	-----

APPENDIX

A. Basic Skills Survey -- Administrators/Teachers	207
B. Basic Skills Survey -- Parents and Students	210
C. Abstract for Human Subjects Review	213
D. Consent Forms	214-216
E. Interview Guide Basic Questions	217-218

BIBLIOGRAPHY	219
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LIST OF TABLES

Table

Responses to the Statements:

1:	The Massachusetts Department of Education should require local school systems to have a Basic Skills Policy.	148
2:	I am aware that the state requires school systems to develop a basic skills program to help students master basic skills before graduation.	149
3:	The Basic Skills Policy is important.	150
4:	There is too much concern for basic skills.	150
5:	Before the Basic Skills Policy was adopted, the schools were not stressing fundamentals.	152
6:	The public had a right to criticize the schools for not focusing on basics.	152
7:	Changes in society were more responsible than the schools for poor basic skills in students.	153
8:	The Basic Skills Policy should focus on the: elementary level alone secondary level alone elementary and secondary levels together	155
9:	Remediation for weak students should be provided as early as possible.	156
10:	Students are learning more because of the basic skills program.	157
11:	List the basic skills area (reading, writing, math) you feel has improved the most as a result of the Policy.	158
12:	I provide instructional activities aimed at the basic skills objectives.	159

Table

Responses to the Statements:

13:	I feel the identified basic skills objectives accurately reflect basic skills as I see them.	159
14:	Basic skills should be taught in other content areas as well, such as social studies and science.	160
15:	The teaching of basic skills prevents me from teaching higher order reasoning skills.	160
16:	The current curriculum should be changed in light of the basic skills objectives.	161
17:	I am evaluated by my superiors on how well my students perform on the basic skills test.	162
18:	More time should be devoted to reading, writing, and math rather than other subjects.	162
19:	Teachers are spending more time on fundamentals.	163
20:	There are too many elective courses at the high school.	163
21:	Students are not spending enough time on homework.	164
22:	Disruptive students prevent the teaching of basic skills.	164
23:	The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, and math.	165
24:	The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking.	165
25:	Students should be tested in basic skills before being allowed to pass a grade.	166
26:	Students should not be allowed to graduate if they fail the basic skills test.	167

Table

Responses to the Statements:

27:	Students with special needs and limited English ability should be exempted from the testing.	168
28:	All school systems should be required to take the same basic skills test.	169
29:	All school systems should be required to test at the same grade level for basic skills.	169
30:	There should be uniform pass/fail standards for all school systems in the state.	170
31:	Students should be given extra help if they fail basic skills tests.	170
32:	I make special provisions for students who fail basic skills.	171
33:	Students are given extra help if they fail the basic skills test.	171
34:	The public should be allowed to participate in the Basic Skills Program.	172
35:	School systems should be required to report the test results to the media.	173
36:	There will be statewide standards next year, meaning that all students in grades three, six, and nine will take the same test, at the same time of year, and be judged according to one passing score. Statewide standards will be beneficial.	174

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

There has existed widespread concern in recent years over the deficiencies in the basic academic skills achievement of the nation's public school students. Declining scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests and standardized achievement tests created alarm in both the educational and public sectors that the schools were not providing adequate academic experiences for their students. Employers reported that applicants lacked fundamental skills in written and oral communication, as well as computation.

Society has not only been dissatisfied with the product of the school systems, namely the students, but also with the apparent lack of accountability within the schools. As a result, over the past ten years, citizen groups across the country lobbied substantially with their respective legislatures to propose specific educational programs with standards. One of the measures adopted to help improve the quality of the educational experience was the minimum competency or basic skills testing program.

State legislatures thrust Minimum Competency Testing on U.S. public schools in the mid seventies to insure that all high school graduates attain a given level of literacy.¹

Stronge has stated that many proponents of the minimum competency testing movement mentioned open classrooms, academic freedom and, student electives as explanations for a lack of attention to basic skills.² The erosion of disciplinary techniques seriously hampered the acquisition of minimal academic competencies.

The school system as a social institution was being required to be responsible for many activities which heretofore were being assumed by the family. The changing character of American society, ethnic diversity, as well as the influence of television were also cited as explanations for the deterioration of basic skills.

In terms of definition, minimum competency or basic skills testing programs are vehicles to assess the impact that curricular instructional strategies are having on student performance. Although the terms minimum competency testing program and basic skills program are often used interchangeably, basic skills instruction really refers to a process of fundamental education, whereas minimum competency testing refers to the end product. Although Oregon was the first state to pass legislation for minimum competency in 1978, history demonstrates that the New York Regents Examination adopted back in 1865 was in reality the first competency testing model. Since that time, society has made continual demands on its schools

for increased efficiency, proficiency, and accountability. To support this notion, Girrback and Claus, in a review of literature on competency testing, noted that an increasing proportion of families' income was being spent on taxes, increased percentages of students were not meeting literacy standards, and industry was developing effective management techniques which schools should emulate.³

The Problem Statement

Since the minimum competency programs are relatively new in the schools, little research into their effects on student growth or staff attitudes has been applied. In fact, most attention has been devoted to test construction, pilot testing and implementation of programs. The problem as seen by society is that the nation's schools have not been devoting sufficient attention to basic skills attainment:

The Minimum Competency Testing movement has been a natural outgrowth of two societal trends: (1) schools have received increasing criticism for graduating students who are not adequately prepared for citizenship and employment, and (2) taxpayers have become more vocal in demanding accountability for the use of tax dollars to support public schooling.⁴

Because of the decline in achievement of the nation's schools over the past decade, the public put pressure on its legislators to do something about the quality of

schools. Since the mid-seventies, all states have adopted minimum competency testing programs, with approximately half of them tying graduation to the passage of a basic skills test.

Chris Pipho, of the Education Commission of the States, has noted that while the initial thrust was on certification of skills, the focus has shifted to:

creating an early-warning testing program that would report on students' progress as they left elementary, junior high or senior high schools. Results can then be used to make better decisions for improving the instructional program and for providing remediation.⁵

The obvious problem confronting society is to ensure that students who gain diplomas do indeed possess the background which the diploma signifies. Concomitantly, society needs to ascertain whether the process by which the diploma is awarded (i.e., educational background) is relevant, rigorous, and worthwhile. One way to assess this concern is to adopt a basic skills policy which entails regular review of curricula and staff development and periodic assessment of student growth. The purpose of this study was to assess the impact that the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy had on the perceptions of administrators, teachers, parents, and students in relation to a national movement toward competency testing.

Qualitative data consisting of in-depth open ended interviewing as well as a survey provided perceptions,

attitudes, and opinions of school and community personnel regarding the Basic Skills Policy.

Need for the Study

Over the past decade, there has been growing dissatisfaction with the levels of mastery of basic skills by American students. Together with a trend toward accountability, many states adopted what are typically called "minimum competency testing programs." These programs have promoted considerable controversy. Proponents have argued that a high school diploma would become more meaningful, taxpayers would receive accountability for their tax dollars, and schools would possess greater assessment devices to measure attainment of objectives.

On the other hand, opponents (Wise)⁶ have asserted that the tests alone would not increase academic achievement, but rather that improved curricula, instruction, and materials would be needed. They have added that minimum competency tests would infringe upon the rights of the handicapped, minority, bilingual, and gifted populations; that validity and reliability of the test instruments would be questionable; and that schools ultimately would become domains of mediocrity.

On the more structured side of the issue, states like Florida mandate that students pass tests as a requirement for high school graduation. Others, like New Hampshire,

simply encourage their districts to adopt their own minimum competency standards. The Massachusetts Basic Skills Improvement Policy is somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

For Massachusetts, each district must develop its own policy, but it does not tie high school graduation to basic skills mastery. School systems must test students and publish their results annually, but the emphasis is on curricular, instructional, and staff development, not just on testing and remediation.

The Massachusetts Basic Skills Improvement Policy is a state mandated program, developed by the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1979. The Policy requires each school system to (1) develop its own basic skills objectives, (2) set pass/fail test standards, (3) provide instruction aimed at those objectives, (4) test students annually at three grade levels, (5) publicly report the results, (6) provide assistance to students who do not meet local standards, and (7) involve a broad range of students, staff, and citizens in the entire process. Mastery of basic skills in reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking is the goal for all students by the time of their graduation.⁷

Implementation of the Policy began during the 1979-80 school year when all districts were required to develop basic skills plans in reading, writing, and mathematics.

These plans needed to include: a description of how segments of both the educational and lay community participated in the development of the plan; basic skills objectives and acceptable levels of achievement; assurances that curricula, instruction, and staff training would be upgraded; a description of tests; grade levels to be tested; how the public will be informed; and follow-up instructional programs and services for students who do not meet minimum standards.

In 1980-81, school districts began implementing their programs and reporting to the Department of Education the number and percentages of students by race, sex, and linguistic minority who had and had not achieved the minimum standards for the early elementary (K-3), later elementary (4-6), and secondary levels (7-12). Since then (1980-81, 1981-82, 1982-83, 1983-84, 1984-85), districts were required to submit the following information annually to the Department of Education:

1. The grade level at which students were evaluated.
2. The evaluation instrument used.
3. A description of the minimum standards.
4. The number of students who did/did not achieve minimum standards.
5. The number of male and female students who did/did not achieve minimum standards.

6. The number of students by race who did/did not achieve minimum standards.
7. The number of students who were exempted/not evaluated during the school year.

Description of the Town and School System

Bellingham, incorporated in 1719, is a suburban community located in southeastern Massachusetts. It is bordered on the east by Franklin and Wrentham, on the south by the state of Rhode Island, on the west by Blackstone, Medway, and Hopedale, and on the northeast and north by Milford and Medway. Bellingham is situated in the center of a triangle with Boston, Worcester, and Providence, Rhode Island, each approximately 30 miles away. It is governed by a board of selectmen, moderator, and Massachusetts open town meeting. Bellingham is within Norfolk County and has a population of approximately 14,000. Median family income (1980) was \$21,000, which resides within the statewide average.

The population's heritage is primarily French Canadian and its primary religious persuasion is Catholicism. Until the early twentieth century, the economy of Bellingham was primarily agrarian. Textile mills in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and the Blackstone Valley employed many residents later in this century. Although the mills are gone today, the interstate highway network, as well as the

need for greater living space away from the cities, created a population explosion. A town of 5,000 in 1955 grew to 14,000 in 1970 and has stabilized since that time. Currently, it is a town looking to expand its commercial and industrial base, to provide greater job opportunities for its citizens and to broaden its tax base.

The public school system consists of three elementary districts and a high school. Enrollment peaked in 1975 at over 4,500 students. Currently there are 2,700 students in the system. At the elementary level there are 1,600 students in grades kindergarten through seven. The high school, which houses grades eight through twelve, contains 1,100 students. School closings and staff reductions have been necessary over the past several years because of enrollment figures and Proposition 2-1/2.

The Massachusetts Department of Education

Policy on Basic Skills

The Massachusetts Basic Skills Improvement Policy was enacted by the State Board of Education in 1979. The Policy requires each school district in the Commonwealth to develop its own basic skills improvement program by: setting basic skills objectives and pass/fail test standards; providing instruction aimed at those objectives; testing students annually at three grade levels (early elementary, later elementary, secondary), and publicly

reporting the results; providing assistance to students who do not meet local standards; and involving a broad range of students, staff, and citizens in the entire process. By engaging in these activities the Board hoped that all Massachusetts students would master basic skills in reading, mathematics, listening, writing, and speaking by the time of their high school graduation.

A study conducted by the Board of Education in 1983 on the impact of the Policy on cities and towns statewide revealed higher implementation in residential suburbs as opposed to industrial cities and in elementary as opposed to secondary schools. The Board speculated that socio-economic factors as well as elementary schools' traditional tendency to adapt more readily to policy changes contributed to these findings. This study also revealed that only about 10% of the schools and districts in Massachusetts could be classified as "high implementers," meaning that they had pursued comprehensive curricular, instructional, and testing/remediation reforms in direct response to the Policy.⁸

The Board also found an absence of "hard" evidence about possible improvements in Massachusetts students' mastery of basic skills given the high degree of local school district discretion. Of equal concern was the fact that one-third to one-half of the educators in the Commonwealth, especially teachers, knew little or nothing about

their local basic skills programs or about the statewide Policy.

Before, during, and since its implementation, the Policy has provided debate throughout the state about whether existing provisions are too weak. As an example, proponents of change argued that statewide standardization of the tests given, the grade levels to be tested, and the time of year should be instituted. Tying graduation to the passage of the Basic Skills Test has also been debated. Advocates of change reason that standardization will permit valid comparisons among districts and assure equity for students. In contrast, opponents look with disfavor on interdistrict comparisons, fearing unfair and damaging conclusions given the state's diversity of community wealth and students' abilities.

The Board of Education also found consistency with other studies relating to mandated or voluntary programs. Schools and districts exhibit consistent and predictable patterns with respect to change. Their reactions are similar to personality traits: deep seated, consistent over time, and difficult to change.

Description of Bellingham's Basic Skills Program

The town of Bellingham tests students in grades three, six, and eight for basic skills purposes. Students in grades three and six had been given the Stanford

Diagnostic Reading and Math Tests during the 1980-81 through 1982-83 school years. During the 1983-84 school year, the Stanford Achievement Tests replaced the Stanford Diagnostic Test because of upgraded norming procedures. The Stanford Achievement Tests were nationally renormed for 1982. The Bellingham Advisory Committee reviewed several tests and ascertained that the updated Stanford Achievement Tests were most suitable for the school system's needs. In addition to standardized tests, students in grades three and six have been given writing samples (letters and compositions) since the policy was adopted and these are scored holistically.

The State Department of Education requires that each school system evaluate students at the secondary level before the second semester of their ninth grade. This allows for ample time to provide remediation for students who fail. In Bellingham, grade eight has been selected as the initial testing grade. Students in grade eight have been evaluated with the Massachusetts Test of Basic Skills (a test prepared by the Department of Education) for reading, math, and writing.

The skill of listening has been added to the policy since the 1982-83 school year and students in both the elementary and secondary levels are tested in that area.

Each year, Bellingham reports to the Massachusetts Department of Education numbers of students who pass/fail

in each of these grade levels and skill areas. Certain special needs and bilingual students may be exempted from either the test and/or reporting process.

Students who fail any basic skills area are to be provided with remedial instruction ranging on a continuum from in-class extra help to remedial courses or special needs instruction.

All parents are notified by letter of the results of their child's test and are encouraged to discuss any concerns with the classroom teachers or guidance staff.

In-service training has been provided to the staff in the areas of writing, reading, and testing. The curriculum has been totally revised at the secondary level over the past several years, and at the elementary level teachers have reviewed testing data and correlated it with their language arts and math curriculum guides.

The Basic Skills Program is comprised of a committee of teachers, administrators, parents, and students who meet monthly to discuss policy matters and to resolve issues relating to basic skills.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact that the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy had on the perceptions of administrators, teacher, parents, and

students in relation to a national movement toward competency testing. Research questions to be answered included:

1. What was perceived as happening in the program?
2. What was perceived as important in the program?
3. What variations existed between groups?
4. What were the characteristics of the groups?

There were four distinct groups from which information was obtained. These four groups were: (1) administrators, (2) teachers, (3) parents, and (4) students. Each of these groups brought to the study various perspectives regarding the Basic Skills Policy. The rationale for including these categories arose from the fact that each group represented a unique place in terms of program implementation. Since the Basic Skills Policy was a mandated, not voluntary, program, all groups were required to participate. As stated previously, the basic skills testing movement was initiated by citizens, not educators. The researcher was interested in obtaining the opinions of service providers and consumers to note the obvious and subtle similarities and differences.

The initial data were collected by means of in-depth interviews with the following personnel:

1. The Superintendent of Schools
2. The Director of Guidance
3. A Special Needs Coordinator
4. A parent member of the Basic Skills Committee

5. A student member of the senior class
6. The researcher, Chairperson of the Basic Skills Committee

All interviewees were involved with the Basic Skills Program for at least the past four years. The student was required to take the Massachusetts Test of Basic Skills in the ninth grade. The parent had two children who were members of the elementary and secondary schools in the community. The four educational staff members had been closely involved with the development and implementation of the program.

The interviews were unstructured in nature, but the researcher, using an interview guide, directed the subjects to respond to the following categories:

1. Each subject's perceptions of the relative importance of establishing a basic skills program.
2. Identification of which components were considered not essential.
3. Perceived conflicts between a state mandated program and local district autonomy in regard to test data, subject areas, grade levels, and students.
4. Selection of suitable and appropriate grade levels to be tested.

5. Effect of the Basic Skills Policy on the following:

Curriculum: Will it create or lead to a uniform curriculum statewide and thereby stifle or restrain creativity in course selection or development?

Teachers: Will teachers feel obligated to teach to the test? Will they accentuate basic skills objectives to the detriment or exclusion of higher order thinking skills? Will they feel that a basic skills test and its results are a reflection of their teaching ability and, following that line of thinking, will they feel that they will be evaluated based upon their classes' basic skills results?

6. Examination of the subjects' expectations for him/herself and expectations held by others in regard to the Basic Skills Policy (i.e.: Were the administrators' perceptions of their roles congruent with the perception of teachers concerning their roles? Did teachers feel administrators should place more or less emphasis on the test results in the teacher evaluation process?).

7. Influence on the process of learning as a result of the Basic Skills Policy. Were teachers better prepared and trained in the process of learning and were they teaching better as a result? Was individualized instruction and incremental learning taking place?

Parents' perspective	Students' perspective
Teachers' perspective	Administrators' perspective

8. Emphasis at the elementary or secondary level. Should testing occur early and often to eventually prepare students for the final evaluation?
9. Attitudes toward establishing standardized promotion and/or graduation requirements based on minimum competency testing.
10. Perceptions of the quality and quantity of remedial service following failure of the minimum competency test.
11. Attitudes toward exceptions (i.e., special needs students, bilingual students).
12. Effects on the gifted and talented population if curriculum and teaching strategies are solely emphasized on the minimum competencies. Will they be lost in the shuffle?

The data collected at this stage of the research, i.e., unstructured interviews with key respondents,

assisted the researcher in generating a survey questionnaire which was then administered to other members of the selected categories.

The purpose of this study, then, was to assess the impact that the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy had on the perceptions of administrators, teachers, parents, and students in relation to a national movement toward competency testing.

Significance of the Problem

Proponents of the minimum competency testing movement (Pipho,⁹ Jaeger¹⁰) assert that school systems need to return to specific instruction in the basic skills areas. In order to compete successfully in today's or tomorrow's employment market, graduates will be required to possess a solid foundation of basic skills which they will be able to transfer and apply to the dynamic nature of society. As Noggle aptly wrote in discussing the pressing demand for a basic education:

What is basic and fundamental now and upon which advanced and various areas of learning are now dependent, so will they be in the future with minimal variation. That we can't with great accuracy predict the future is precisely why we must project into it some solidity upon which a variety of experiences can comfortably rest.¹¹

By utilizing information obtained from direct service providers and users of the Policy, the study described the knowledge and acceptance levels of the selected groups.

The perceptions of these various groups were studied, analyzed, and interpreted. Issues were raised regarding the utility of instituting a minimum competency testing program to improve the quality of education. Participants were asked to reflect upon the necessity or desirability of a minimum competency testing program.

Although many studies have been conducted regarding the need for the establishment of basic skills programs, there has been a dearth of follow-up attitudinal reactions because of the relatively new installation of programs.

Hutchinson has noted that:

evaluation has as its primary purpose the collection of data to be used as feedback to decision-makers in order to provide a basis for their decision making.¹²

Similarly, Cronbach viewed evaluation broadly as the "collection and use of information to make decisions about an educational program."¹³ It was this researcher's intent to collect qualitative and quantitative data that would assist in one area of the cumulative program evaluation process. Perceptions obtained from providers and consumers are important sources of information to be used by decision makers in evaluating the effect of the policy. Comparisons between groups of administrators, teachers, parents, and students were made. Information provided by each group assisted decision makers in formulating suggestions for program modification.

Definition of Terms

Minimum Competency Testing: "criterion referenced mastery tests that measure the achievement of minimum levels of acceptable performance established by experts in the field."¹⁴

Basic Skills Education: "application of a set of skills such as reading, writing, and math to a set of general knowledge areas such as consumer economics, government, or occupations."¹⁵

Standard Setting: the process of determining appropriate cut-off scores for minimum competency testing.

Holistic Scoring: the process of judging writing samples from students by total impression rather than mechanics.

Qualitative Methodology: "refers to those research strategies such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, total participation in the activity being investigated, field work, etc., which allow the researcher to obtain first hand knowledge about the empirical world in question. Qualitative Methodology allows the researcher to 'get close to data' thereby developing the analytical, conceptual and categorical components of explanations from the data itself -- rather than from the preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into

the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed."¹⁶

Qualitative Analysis: the non-numerical organization of data in order to discover patterns, themes, forms, and qualities found in field notes, interview transcripts, open-ended questionnaires, case studies, etc.

Program Evaluation: the process of providing relevant data to decision makers in respect to a project.

Reliability: the measure of a test's ability to replicate the results. Theoretically, the same test given to the same person should give the same results each time it is administered.

Validity: the measure of a test's ability to measure what it is supposed to measure. Do the questions test the student's knowledge or skill or do the correct answers depend on hidden variables in a student's background?

Instructional Match: the measure of a test's congruity with the topics that the student has been taught in school. The test should match the student's course of instruction.

Bias: the failure of a test's results to have the same meaning for one group as for another. When an item or test is biased, it is measuring different things for different groups. This concept is different from the possibility that one group may not achieve as well as another.

Norm Referenced Tests: grading on the "curve."

There will be a mean and a standard deviation on the test as it was taken by all students, and an individual's performance will be measured against that of his peers to determine success or failure.

Criterion Referenced: grading against past performance. Incremental improvement on tests are the measure of success.¹⁷

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Perspective

The concept of minimum competency testing for the nation's public schools has had an extended development. Beginning with the state testing program of the New York Regents in 1865, which tested information to be mastered by all students who desired to obtain a Regents' diploma, the minimum competency testing program has progressively grown over the past century. The Iowa Every Pupil Test initiated in 1929 attempted to assess significant educational objectives. The General Education Development (GED) tests have been used since World War II to certify that high school competencies have been mastered.¹

During the 1950's, literature such as Why Johnny Can't Read, How Children Fail, and Crisis in the Classroom questioned the methods and instructional strategies of the public schools. In 1960, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was adopted to provide a periodic measure of educational attainment in important areas.

Nafziger noted that in 1970, 30 states had assessment or other testing programs, while by 1975, 44 states had implemented them.² Gairbach and Claus, in a

literature review, noted three trends between 1960 and 1970 which influenced the current emphasis on accountability:

1. the proportion of family income spent on taxes was increasing,
2. large numbers of students were not meeting literacy standards,
3. defense and industry were developing effective and efficient management techniques.³

Sutter, in commenting on the historical roots of standards and testing programs, stated that:

one historical root is the concept of scientific management -- the idea that schools should be managed in a more scientific or systematic way. This idea is at least 140 years old, and has appeared in many different forms. It seems to grow in popularity in the 70's.⁴

He also discussed the accountability movement -- the idea that participants in the educational process should be able to prove that they are achieving desired results and should suffer the negative consequences if they aren't.

Leon Lesinger, in Every Kid a Winner in 1970, advocated defining goals in measurable and observable terms.⁵

Heightened interest for the present minimum competency testing movement has really developed over the past ten years as a reaction to the "progressive and expanding liberal philosophies of the sixties and early seventies."⁶ The public has had the perception, supported by substantial media coverage, that the public schools have

not been meeting the needs of students. The schools have been criticized for graduating students who are insufficiently prepared for employment, post-secondary schooling, or citizenship. The diploma has lost its meaning and is essentially a certification of attendance, rather than a demonstration of competence.

During the 70's, proponents of basic education argued that the schools were trying to do too many things, and that they should concentrate more on developing students' basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.⁷

Documentation supporting this contention has been provided by U.S. News and World Report.⁸ The following data was highlighted:

1. 13% of all 17 year olds were functionally illiterate -- incapable of reading newspapers, completing job applications, or calculating change at a cash register.
2. Absenteeism was approximately 25% daily as a national average.
3. 30% of college freshmen at Ohio State University required remedial courses in English and Math.
4. Teachers appeared more permissive, less dedicated and demanded fewer writing and homework assignments.

Logar noted that:

According to HEW (now HHS), approximately one million children between the ages of twelve and fourteen are illiterate and about 20% of all adults have some literacy difficulty.⁹

A Gallup Poll reflecting "Society's Attitude Toward Public Schools," conducted in 1976, revealed that the public strongly felt that schools should devote more attention to teaching basic skills; the quality of education was declining; and favored a nationwide standard for high school graduation. Taxpayers were becoming more insistent that the schools become more accountable for the use of their tax dollars. Declining test scores were presented in national reports as substantiation for more structured and basic educational programs. "Back to Basics" was a theme heard nationally. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported declines on its science and writing tests from 1970 to 1974. In 1978, the National Academy of Education cited four factors contributing to declining test scores:

1. Proliferation of courses.
2. Confusion about teacher roles.
3. Loosening of "on-task" attention.
4. Decreased opportunities for intensive study.¹⁰

Emphasis on the "whole child," academic freedom, humanism, and open education were seen also as contributing factors to the inferior quality of performance. Airasian noted that the minimum competency movement developed as a reaction to the public's perceptions that the schools were neglecting the three R's and that scholastic standards were declining.¹¹

Declining scores since 1965 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT) fueled the fire for public dissatisfaction. Ebel revealed that equivalent scores on the 1964 and 1973 editions of the Stanford Achievement Test indicated that an average student in the eighth grade in 1973 could read approximately the same as an average student in the middle of the sixth grade in 1964. The United States Office of Education reported in 1975 that there were 23 million functionally illiterate adults. The Association of American Publishers lowered the reading level for college freshman study guides in 1975 to a ninth grade reading level.¹²

Public Reaction -- Legislative Action

As a result of these declining test scores, society's trend toward accountability, and the perceived increasing rate of functional illiteracy, the public put pressure on its state legislators. "Minimum competency testing has been supported by a broad coalition of parents, employers, legislators, and state and local boards of education."¹³ Political action by state legislatures and state boards of education was fervent during the mid-1970's. Chris Pipho of the Education Commission of the States continually updated legislative action and revealed that by 1984 all states had some type of legislative action concerning minimum competency testing. About

half of the state competency programs were put into effect by state legislatures and the other half by the state departments of education.

Although proficiency examinations have had a long history, the present use of competency tests as a stipulation for promotion or graduation has a relatively short history. In 1976, only four states had enacted student competency legislation. However, three years later, 36 states had laws or regulations relating to minimum competency requirements. Klein reported that among the 40 states that have mandated minimum competency testing, nearly half have tied the tests to high school graduation requirements.¹⁴ Pipho noted that legislative action ranged from explicit mandate to simple expression of concern.

Denver, Colorado, the pioneer in competency testing, has required the passage of a proficiency test for graduation since 1960. Oregon was the first state to actually pass legislation in 1973 for the class for 1978, mandating a competency testing program. Arizona was the first state to tie diploma awarding to competency testing in 1976. Students needed to demonstrate a ninth grade reading level. Other states that showed early interest in minimum competency testing were Oregon, Virginia, Florida, New York, California, Louisiana, and Maryland.

At the national level, there has been some interest. Representative Mottl (Ohio) presented a bill for a national graduation standard, but the congressional and executive branches have been reluctant to interfere with the constitutional rights of the states.¹⁵ Nationally, the federal role has been concerned with providing information, supporting research, and providing technical assistance. State boards of education, through state legislative action, have been in the process of developing programs for local implementation.

Generally, programs fall into one of three categories:

1. Testing conducted by state departments of education and given to all students in the state.
2. State developed guidelines with local district modification.
3. Locally developed programs without statewide guidelines.

Purpose of Minimum Competency Testing

At this point, it is important to make the distinction between competency based education and minimum competency testing. Although the literature often used the terms interchangeably, there does appear to be a distinction. Competency based education is a philosophy of education that accentuates measurable goals and instructional objectives. It is the technology used to

implement the "accountability" mandated by the state legislatures. Minimum competency testing is the tool used to measure the attainment of the education objectives. Competency based education is a systems approach, whereas competency based testing reflects upon individual students. "Competency based education is more than a testing program, but a complete philosophy of how teachers teach and how students learn."¹⁶ It focuses on behavioral objectives, performance, programmed instruction, and output. Competency based education and assessment programs are complex processes that are really instructional management systems. Competency based education is the means or the procedures and competency based testing is the end or results. Using that clarification, discussion of the goals, advantages, or purposes of minimum competency testing needs to take place. Among the possible rationales discussed in the literature for a minimum competency testing program are the following:

1. MCT assures that high school graduates will have at least minimum basic skills, producing academic literacy.
2. Public education becomes more accountable for its action.
3. Diplomas and/or promotion to another grade becomes more meaningful -- not just social promotion.

4. Curriculum focus and individualization of instruction are provided.
5. Student deficiencies are identified and remediation is conducted.
6. A reorganization of learning objectives that are sequenced and relevant is provided.
7. Employers are assisted in identifying job candidates who have basic skills.
8. Students become aware of their responsibility regarding learning.
9. All students are taught identical core content area skills.
10. Documentation or evaluation of effective versus non-effective classroom instruction is provided.
11. School effectiveness is enhanced through the systematic methods of assessing attainment of specified objectives.
12. A database is created for monitoring student progress statewide.
13. Tests will restore public confidence in the schools by substantiating that every certified graduate possesses a core of basic skills.

Pipho cited that 14 states mentioned certification of basic skills competencies prior to high school graduation as a major purpose and two states reported using competency achievement as one criterion for grade to grade

The passage of this Act made Massachusetts the first state in the nation to require the teaching of drawing in the public schools.

After the Act of 1870 which made drawing compulsory in the public schools, the State Board of Education applied to the Legislature for increased funds for the following purposes: first, to obtain the services of a person competent to direct work in normal schools and to visit and confer with city school boards; second, to provide some means for training special drawing teachers (Farnum, 1914).

Walter Smith, then a teacher of Industrial Drawing and Crafts at the South Kensington School in England, was invited in 1871 by the State Board of Education to come to America to direct the newly-founded state program. Following a brief visit, Smith took over the post.²³

The basis of Smith's philosophy was that any person could learn to draw. He stated:

There can be no doubt from the common-sense point of view that every healthy man is a possible artist, just as every intelligent man is possibly a literary man.²⁴

He believed in art for everyone, not just for a chosen few with recognized talent.

However, Smith did make a sharp distinction between the industrial and the fine arts. He would have nothing to do with the latter.

Instead, he emphasized the type of drawing which led to industrial art.

The drawing as taught in the schools should be essentially a preparation for the understanding and practice of industrial art--the first kind of art practiced by all nations. The instruction should comprise both instrumental and free-hand drawing, the first to cultivate a love for and habits of accuracy; the second to develop power and skill in the observation and expression of the inexact. One is not more important than the other, but either alone is a very helpless accomplishment, whilst the boy or man who can handle

2. If many students fail, test and school objectives should be reviewed.
3. Students should be required to master certain basic skills.
4. A high school diploma should certify mastery of basic skills.
5. Students should be required to pass a competency test before receiving a diploma.¹⁹

Definition of Minimum Competency Testing

The literature is replete with definitions of minimum competency testing. At this point, elaboration of the discussion held earlier between competency based education and minimum competency testing will more succinctly define competency testing. Logar stated:

What is competency testing? It has been defined as a standardized exam designed to demonstrate whether a student has reached a given level of proficiency in any one of several basic skills.²⁰

The American Heritage Dictionary defines competent as "properly or well qualified, capable, adequate for the purpose."²¹ Williams and Beard, in defining minimum competency testing, refer to criterion referenced mastery tests that measure the achievement of minimum levels of acceptable performance established by experts in the field. They go on to state that scoring standards must be based on clearly established defensible criteria which

define success (mastery) or failure (non-mastery).²²

Jaeger, in describing competence, mentions five underlying assumptions:

1. Competency exists as a unique construct for adults.
2. One way to obtain competency is through 12 years of formal schooling and graduation.
3. Competence is possessed in greater or lesser degrees.
4. Competence is measurable.
5. Competence is necessary to function successfully as an adult.²³

Wylie and Williams describe the United States Office of Education definition of basic skills education:

Basic Skills Education refers to the fundamental competencies that hold the key to successful achievement in the areas of communication and computation (listening, reading, writing, arithmetic).²⁴

Basic skills are seen as a basic, fundamental right of each of the nation's citizens and are valuable only if they can be used or applied. Airasian, reporting to the Massachusetts Advisory Committee on High School Graduation Requirements in 1978, discussed the distinction between "enabler skills" -- reading, writing, and arithmetic -- and "life skills" -- application of enabler skills to life situations (e.g., balancing a checkbook, completing an income tax return, measuring a room).²⁵ There has been

considerable concern surrounding the issue of whether minimum competency or basic skills should entail enabler or life skills. Most states focus on the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. Although they state that students should be able to apply these skills when they graduate, performance testing of life skills is offered in only a small number of states (e.g., Oregon). Steele, in a dissertation survey of attitudes of Texas school board member toward minimum competency testing, noted that board members believed that students who were competent to perform basic academic skills would also be competent to perform life skills.²⁶ Britell defines educational competence "as that level of performance that citizens require to function in their society."²⁷ He contrasts this with educational excellence, which is the ideal standard, attained by only a few.

In many cases, competency testing is seen as applied performance testing, which is the measurement of performance in an actual or simulated setting (e.g., driver training). Competency tests are also seen as criterion referenced tests constructed to yield measurements that are directly interpretable in terms of prespecified performance standards.

Bossone and Troyka defined minimum competency as basic proficiencies in skills and the knowledge needed to perform successfully in real life situations.

Competency based education covers the application of a set of skills such as reading, writing, and math to a set of general knowledge areas such as consumer economics, government or occupations.²⁸

In 1978, Today's Education defined minimum competency testing as "any program of assessment, evaluation, certification or testing that is designed to determine whether individual students have reached a minimum level of performance predetermined as satisfactory."²⁹

Description of Model Programs

Sutter, in developing a list of characteristics of effective testing programs, noted the following:

1. Tests should be directly related to the school's curriculum. What is tested should have been taught.
2. The types of questions asked on the tests should be provided in advance of the actual tests.
3. Test scores should never be the sole criterion for promotion, graduation, or other important decisions.
4. Schools should develop remedial programs for students who fail the tests.
5. Schools and teachers should use tests as evidence of strengths and weaknesses in their programs, and should use the results to plan changes in curriculum and teaching techniques.

6. Schools should develop means of challenging students to achieve well beyond the minimum standards.³⁰

Girrbach and Claus describe local district programs which have been effective:

1. Denver, Colorado, began its competency program in 1960. Criterion referenced tests in math, spelling, language, and reading are administered to students in grades 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12. They have reduced their failure rate to 1.5%.
2. Detroit, Michigan, has developed an objective referenced instructional program to improve instruction in basic skills. The program does not award diplomas to low performing students. Remedial classes are offered during the regular school year along with a summer school program to help students master any competencies they did not pass.
3. Pasadena, California, developed a sequential course of study of "minimum essentials" in math and English. Beginning in 1980, students were required to pass proficiency tests in writing, computation, and reading comprehension to graduate. Testing is done once between seventh and ninth grades and twice between tenth and eleventh grades.

4. Portland, Oregon, began its program in the fall of 1977. A citywide minimum competency achievement testing program in reading, math, and language is used in grades 3 through 12.
5. The state of Missouri established a Competency Testing Program in 1976 which entailed the application of basic skills to everyday situations. Beginning in 1978-79, every eighth grader and those who fail each year thereafter are administered the Basic Essential Skills Test (BEST).
6. The state of Massachusetts established a Basic Skills Improvement Program in 1978. The Massachusetts Policy does not explicitly establish a separate instructional program beyond the service normally provided in the public schools. Beginning in the year 1980-81, school districts needed to report the results of their testing programs to the state department of education.³¹

McCarthy mentioned the following as notable programs:

1. Oregon's Goal Based Program
2. Florida's Functional Literacy Skills Program
3. New York's Pupil Evaluation Program³²

Walstead, in a study analyzing the reasons for improved test performances by students in minimum competency testing programs, cited:

1. a modified curriculum,
2. formal workshops for teachers on minimum competency testing,
3. administering pre-tests to students.³³

Criticisms of Minimum Competency Testing (MCT) Programs

Opponents of MCT programs are vociferous in their positions regarding the pitfalls or dangers associated with this movement. "Minimum competency testing has generally been opposed by traditional education leaders, including teachers, administrators, professors and researchers."³⁴ They describe the following situations as potential drawbacks:

1. Critical decisions on a student such as graduation or promotion should not rest on a single test score.
2. Validity of tests is questionable. (Content: does the test evaluate essential basic skills that students need to function successfully in life? Instructional: does the school system provide specific instruction and curricula that will prepare the student for the successful completion of the test?)

3. Disagreements concerning appropriate standards or cut-off scores for MCT create negative media coverage.
4. Selecting suitable alternatives for students who do not pass the tests is expensive (e.g., more remediation will be needed, students may remain in school longer, in-service training for teachers will be required).
5. Relating the results of criterion referenced tests to norm referenced tests is difficult. The public wants to know what grade levels of achievement correspond to MCT.
6. Schools will be forced to focus all their attention on the slow learning and under-achievers to insure the attainment of basic skills. A decline in performance expectations for average and gifted students may occur. Williams and Beard cited the negative effect of the British Public Examination on education in that country.³⁵ The high schools in Great Britain focus so closely on these tests that other educational topics are slighted. It is feared that the teaching of basic skills in this country will interfere with curriculum development in other areas.

7. MCT places unfair burdens on minorities, handicapped, and bilingual, producing a rash of lawsuits.
8. MCT leads to increased beaurocracy and paperwork.
9. Teachers may teach to the test and ignore other important aspects of the curruculum. MCT may be inappropriately used as teacher evaluation tools, teacher unions may rebel, and teachers may come to be viewed as automatons, losing their spontaneity.
10. MCT erodes the "quest for excellence" and leaves no room for higher aspirations, leading to mediocre work by all.
11. Denying a high school diploma will have adverse economic effects by seriously reducing opportunity for making a living.
12. MCT may dictate the curriculum, not vice versa.
13. Declining SAT scores really reflect deterioration of higher order cognitive skills, not basic skills.
14. By testing early and labeling students, some may be prevented for participating in certain programs and resegregation may occur.
15. There will be a confusion of the meaning of a diploma if each district sets its own standards.

16. Emphasis on practical education may erode liberal education.
17. Dropout rate could increase depending on the level of competency required. Slow learners may be discouraged from competing for a diploma.
18. MCT really is a duplication of other school testing and remedial programs (e.g., Chapter One, Chapter 766, Remedial Reading).

Testing Issues

As stated in an earlier section on the purposes of MCT, testing may assess basic academic skills (enabler) or life skills (application). Before undertaking a testing program, it is essential that a school system, legislature, or state department of education decide what the basic skills are and how they can be validly measured. According to Girrback and Claus, five alternatives are available in establishing subject areas to be tested which included:

1. Basic skills
2. School subjects
3. Life role competency areas
4. Basic skills applied in school subjects
5. Basic skills applied in life role competency areas³⁶

Once these are determined, choices of tests could include:

1. Actual performance situations, which are expensive and time consuming.
2. Simulated performance situations which closely match real life problems, also time consuming and expensive.
3. Student products review, which could be evaluated subjectively and are expensive.
4. Paper-pencil tests, easiest to administer and score and less costly, but results may not actually predict success in later life.

Kohlfeld, in a survey of basic skills experts from each state, revealed that "the research participants were of the opinion that the best possibilities for measuring competencies are school products and performances."³⁷

Districts must also decide which grade levels to test and how often. Airasian suggests that testing occur early in a student's academic career to provide time for remediation.³⁸ Ample opportunity in high school should be provided to allow students maximum chances of obtaining mastery.

Another critical issue discussed in the literature has been the determination of standards or cut-off scores. Klein noted that there were at least 18 different methods of establishing standards.³⁹ The consensus in the research advocates that representation from both the

educational and lay community be integrally involved in standard setting. Klein also discussed a study conducted by Halpin where the failure rate went from 9% to 78% depending upon the type of standard setting procedure used. Most cut-off scores for competency tests administered to high school seniors are clustering at the junior high level.

The issue of standard setting needs to be carefully planned. If standards are set too high, many students may fail. This could create financial burdens in terms of excessive remedial programs and political problems in terms of large numbers of students failing, creating public relations difficulties. Conversely, if standards are set too low, are competencies really being measured or is MCT one again equivalent to an "attendance diploma"?

MCT implies a single standard of proficiency without regard to varying student abilities. Palady criticized this position by stating the following:

Just as it is unreasonable to expect all joggers to run at the same rate and to cover the same distance so it is unreasonable to expect all students to learn at the same rate and to cover the same amount of academic material. In a system of compulsory education, excellence can be achieved only by holding all students accountable for learning and performing according to their varying capabilities.⁴⁰

Because of varied student abilities, a standard based on ability has been suggested, but this has led to other

problems such as: how many ability groups, or should different diplomas be issued?

Standard setting generally can be accomplished by the following methods:

1. A representative group arrives at a consensus.
2. Pilot testing and use performance of that group as criteria for future groups.
3. Educational experts determine minimum performance levels.

Most researchers advocate setting conservative (low) standards initially and raise them as the need arises and skills improve.

Ericson, in an essay contrasting minimum competency testing and the search for educational excellence, discussed the social implications of increasingly higher standards:

It is one thing to get tougher with academic course graduation requirements, as many states are doing, but quite another thing to elevate standards with some understanding of the impact that such policies may bring about.⁴¹

Litigation Surrounding MCT

Traditionally, the courts have not interfered with school systems' obligations to set academic standards and evaluate pupil performance. In 1978, the United States Supreme Court made the distinction between an academic determination and a disciplinary action, noting that

academics are more subjective in nature than typical facts in disciplinary cases. The Court stated that academic performance should be determined by professional educators with expertise in that area.

However, if students have not been notified of evaluation criteria or not been given enough notice of unsatisfactory performance prior to imposing sanctions, the court has intervened. Also, the courts have ruled in cases of arbitrary or discriminatory practices. They have looked carefully at using a single test score as a means for placing students in tracks, withholding diplomas, or delaying promotion.

The courts have held that to deny a student every opportunity to learn the requisite skills and earn the diploma is a violation of that student's rights. Legally and morally, appropriate reteaching of required skills in which a student is deficient must occur and verification of this reteaching must exist. Then, and only then, can it be shown to the public that schools are accountable for their actions.⁴²

The most significant court case concerning MCT has been *Debra P. vs. Turlington* in Florida in 1978.⁴³ This was a class action suit brought forward by black students challenging Florida's functional literacy examination. They charged that the exam was discriminatory on the basis of race and ethnic background. They felt also that the test included items that had not been taught in Florida's schools. The students further stated that they had not been given sufficient time to prepare for the tests and

that these racially biased tests placed students in remedial classes which resulted in resegregation. Glazer referred to this fact in an article discussing the problems with competence. He stated:

The minimum competency program for high school graduation in Florida has triggered a major and complex constitutional case because of a disproportionate black failure rate.⁴⁴

This case has been appealed several times, but in February of 1984, Sendor reported that the test has been found to be bias free. Previously, the court agreed that more time for notification was needed and prohibited using the test as a graduation criterion until the 1982-83 school year. The court further upheld the state's authority to establish academic requirements and endorsed the use of an exam for diagnostic and remedial purposes. The court upheld the test's "instructional" validity. They found there was a close match between the curriculum in the school and the test items. They also ruled the test to be fair because Florida gives students five chances to take the test and provides remedial help if they fail. The court has not found an unconstitutional impact on black students because of past segregation. Students for the class of 1983 had never attended racially segregated schools.

A similar case, Anderson vs. Banks, involving curricular validity was presented in Georgia.⁴⁵ Arguments

against using the California Achievement Test (CAT) as a prerequisite to a high school diploma were forwarded. However, the court ruled that the CAT was a valid and reliable test and actually covered what was taught in the classroom. They also found that two years notice before using the test as a diploma criterion was constitutionally sound. This suit went further than Debra P. in that it also argued that the MCT program requirements impaired the federal rights of handicapped students. They said it violated the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which prohibited giving otherwise qualified handicapped persons in programs receiving federal financial assistance from normal benefits. The court ruled that school districts must insure that disabled students are exposed to the material on the test or that their guardians have decided upon an alternative educational program. If they are exposed, the tests are not discriminatory.

In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, Hess revealed that as of April of 1985 in Alabama, students were informed of the examination requirements for four years before its implementation and that curriculum validity studies were required. In Alabama, all students who wished to earn a regular high school diploma, including special education students, were required to pass the

AHSGE. Special Test administration procedures were developed for hearing and visually impaired students.⁴⁶

Bossone and Troyka reported on a suit for five million dollars brought by the parents of a 1976 Long Island, New York, student charging the school district with "educational malpractice."⁴⁷ The Peter Doe case in California involved similar action.⁴⁸ Continued litigation in the area of MCT is foreseen, possibly with certified graduates stating that they are not really capable or competent to function in society or non-certified students stating that the schools failed to properly instruct them. The courts have ruled in the past that schools are obliged to expose students to appropriate materials, curricula, and instructional strategies but should not be held liable if individual students do not master the competencies.

Developing a Model for MCT

Noggle argues strongly for basic skills programs as necessary for the schools of the future. Because there will be a continuous need for retraining as jobs become obsolete, students will need to be able to apply past knowledge to new situations, synthesize, plan, and evaluate. These higher level skills will only develop if lower level skills are firmly established. Noggle views the schools as change agents and innovators. They must

realize they can't teach a "little bit of everything."
Schools can't assume all of society's responsibilities.
"Competency based education for the future is based on the school's realistic appraisal of its commitment to devote attention to the curriculum core."⁴⁹ This is a more natural and realistic perception of the school's role. In order to develop a model, Noggle delineates the following steps:

1. Identify a leader who will serve as the guiding force.
2. Develop a clear statement of goals, such as:
 - a. Analyze and make more efficient curricula, instruction, or outcomes.
 - b. Rethink the role of education.
 - c. Diagnose individual needs of students.
3. MCT will only be effective if there is ownership to the program:
 - a. Perform a needs assessment.
 - b. Share results of needs assessment with interested colleagues.
 - c. Research data of MCT and observe other models.
 - d. Obtain staff commitment.

Wylie noted that it was important to identify basic skills instructional programs which work. Key components included the development of strong teacher, administrator,

and staff pre-service and in-service training; parental involvement; continuity of subject matter throughout the system; smaller classes; state/local cooperation positive school climate; and clear evaluation techniques.⁵⁰

Jones discusses several areas of importance when implementing competency based education programs.⁵¹ He felt that MCT should reflect the application of basic skills to practical and real life situations. To become competent, students need to experience success, to be exposed to attainable tasks, and have personalized learning experiences. Pre-testing of students to develop individualized programs with meaningful objectives and remedial assistance if necessary is preferable to retention. MCT will not, by itself, resolve the issue of poor teaching or poor learning. Good teaching requires personal commitment to hard work and good learning demands student responsibility and involvement in the decision making process. For future success, students need to learn how to learn. Successful competency based educational programs use "testing and learning in a diagnostic prescriptive fashion so that all students are provided an opportunity to develop their full potential."⁵²

A review of research conducted in 1980 by the New Jersey State Board of Education on basic skills improvement programs mentioned four factors integral to quality education. They included:

1. The classroom: Productive use of "on-task" time, engagement in constructive activities as opposed to discipline, teacher commitment to the instruction of basic skills, high teacher expectations, positive motivation of students, structured classroom management and organization of instruction, diagnostic-prescriptive approach, peer tutoring.
2. The administration: Support is crucial, instructional and managerial leadership qualities, high expectations for school and staff, strong emphasis on reading mastery, frequent evaluation of student progress, information sharing and problem solving with staff.
3. The school climate: Goal oriented, positive relationships and communication between people at all levels of authority, strong commitment to basic skills mastery.
4. Parents/community involvement: Participation of adult volunteers in schools is a common factor in schools with effective basic skills programs, parental interest and involvement in home-school activities, parental involvement at home in student learning.⁵³

MCT and Selected Populations

Considerable debate has been stimulated regarding the status of minorities, handicapped, bilingual, and gifted students in relation to MCT programs.

Using MCT for school graduation poses an important problem for special students. Attempts to treat these students fairly in testing programs prove frustrating. Some states, like North Carolina, try to modify state assessment tests to make them more equitable for special students.⁵⁴

Other states, like Massachusetts, leave it up to the Core Evaluation Team to determine if the child should participate in testing and/or if the results should be reported to the state department of education. Some educators have argued for "special diplomas" or endorsements for these students, but that makes labeling of the handicapped even more controversial and perhaps a "non-competency diploma" would interfere with employment possibilities.

In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Brown stated that:

In MCT the problem is one of fairness to the student and of insuring equity among all students. Usually, we answer this question by accommodating the handicapped as the test is administered; but requiring the same test content and standard.⁵⁵

Implications regarding MCT and handicapped students were discussed in relation to Public Law 94-142 and

section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by Vance.⁵⁶ These acts mandate that handicapped students be allowed to participate in MCT programs. The school psychologist plays an important role in serving as the liaison between the individual educational plan for the student and MCT requirements.

Airasian asserts that most handicapped pupils should be required to demonstrate all or part of the required competencies.⁵⁷ He also recommends that "communities with high minority populations be cautious that by identifying and remediating students at risk they don't resegregate students."⁵⁸

Girrbach and Claus advise schools to give careful consideration to exceptional students (e.g., physically handicapped, mentally impaired, English as a second language) and how they are to be treated under the program.⁵⁹ Pipho mentioned that schools are being careful in considering the rights of minority and handicapped students in their programs.⁶⁰ For handicapped students, most states are using Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) to decide whether certain students should be part of the testing program. Florida has been developing an equivalent exam for learning disabled students. Nafziger wonders if different standards and test competencies for racial/ethnic groups, special education, or bilingual should be produced.⁶¹

Stronge discussed the view of opponents to MCT regarding the hinderance to the learning process.⁶² Academically talented student needs are not being addressed. Jones warns against mediocrity and advocates challenging bright students.⁶³ Wise states that the expectations of MCT programs are not relevant to good students.⁶⁴ Many researchers (Nafziger)⁶⁵ have questioned the impact of MCT programs on other curriculum offerings in the school. Will the thrust for MCT detract from programs for the gifted and talented? Williams and Beard express the fear that MCT will result in a decline in performance expectations for gifted students.⁶⁶

Impact of MCT on School and Community

Fremer discussed comprehensively the positive and negative impact MCT programs potentially have on students, teachers, curriculum, administrators, parents, employers, and test makers.⁶⁷ On the positive side, students are provided with early identification of their needs, clear instructional goals, remedial opportunities, careful monitoring of their progress, basic skills attainment, and a meaningful diploma. Negatively speaking, dangers of labeling, restriction of school program options, reduction of post-secondary opportunities, and denial of a diploma

are possibilities. Teachers may be provided with instructional and management information, clear goals, in-service training, and supplemental aid. On the other hand, unrealistic assignments, potential loss of jobs, loss of academic freedom, lawsuits, and parental pressures may unfavorably affect teachers. The curriculum could become more objective and clearly stated priorities would be developed, standards would be emphasized, a close match between testing and programs would be implemented. Negatively, the curriculum may be restricted, cram books and coaching may be fostered, school divisiveness may occur, along with limited innovations. Negatively, the administration may need to obtain additional funds for remediation, may be subjected to lawsuits, and may be targeted for poor publicity if the school does not perform well. Parents may obtain a clear understanding of their children's needs, literacy for their children may be provided, along with a meaningful diploma. Adversely, increased taxes for additional programs and denial of their children's diploma may occur. Employers would have access to a certified labor pool with functional literacy, but may also be exposed to higher taxes. Test makers would have an opportunity to contribute substantially to educational goals and have their test results actively used. Support for test development and research may also occur. Unfortunately, test makers may take the blame for

poor test results and may be subjected to lawsuits. The breadth of testing may decrease or an overemphasis on basic skills testing could happen.

Tying MCT to High School Graduation or Promotion

Pipho cited 17 states requiring a satisfactory score on an MCT as a high school graduation requirement.⁶⁸

The purpose of a graduation examination is not to deny diplomas, but rather to ensure the acquisition of certain minimum skills. An examination should never be the sole criteria for a diploma. Remediation and documentation, therefore, must be a part of the plan for implementing a high school graduation examination.⁶⁹

Many states have had discussions about requiring MCT for grade-to-grade promotion, but only Louisiana has definitely tied this strategy to its test. In a research study conducted by Kohlfeld that sought the opinions of key personnel in all states, there was:

strong support for using the standards and the test for instructional improvement and remedial assistance (96% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement). The least favored claim for the use of the standards and the test was grade promotion.⁷⁰

The use of competency testing as a graduation requirement raises important questions such as the issue of content validity proposed in the *Debra P. v. Turlington* landmark case. Schools need to insure that the test they are using accurately reflects the instructional process in the classroom. Many programs are attempting to insure

local content validity by having classroom teacher and other local professionals serve as writers of the test. Other states have used well known and reliable tests to assess MCT. As stated previously, the California Achievement Test withstood the rigors of content validity in Anderson v. Banks in Georgia.

Another important issue is the difficulty in establishing reasonable passing scores for the test. Each state and school district must identify specific skills and minimum levels of performance that must be achieved before graduation. Many scores are set low because society can't afford large numbers of students failing to receive high school diplomas. Kohlfeld reported:

78% of research participants agreed that if the percentage of persons who have been failing on minimum competency tests is too high, there is a possibility that the school and/or state will be unable to afford economically and politically to remediate or not promote or graduate if remediation fails.⁷¹

Many test items are at the sixth and seventh grade levels. There may be a considerable difference between professional and community definitions of minimum competence.

Critics point out that denial of a high school diploma based on test scores not only stigmatizes and prejudices the future of students, but also wastes public funds and resources. Overemphasis on testing rather than teaching may take place.

Ogden found that reading and math scores of students in Austin, Texas, improved after the district required high school students to pass an MCT before graduation. These gains were attributed to improvements in performance of lower achieving students, many of whom enrolled in special tutorial classes to help them meet MCT standards.⁷²

Relationships between MCT and equivalency tests, such as the GED, need to be addressed. Will passing the GED qualify a student for a high school diploma in that district? What happens to students who fail an MCT and pass the GED? Jaeger, in discussing the definition of competence, points out that a person who does not have enough competence ought not to hold a high school diploma.⁷³ Bossone and Troyka assert that the best high school graduation requirements should reflect the mastery of minimum competencies as well as the successful completion of required courses.⁷⁴

Proposals requiring students to pass an MCT to obtain a high school diploma are supported by political, social, and economic forces outside the educational community and will continue to be pervasive in the future.

Financial Impact

MCT programs may have significant impact on the financial resources of state legislatures, state boards of

education, and local educational agencies. Questions that need to be answered regarding the financial nature of MCT programs were presented by Pipho.

1. Should the state finance and the schools teach only agreed to minimum skills?
2. What conditions will the state make for remedial programs and for students who must prolong their school career for failing the MCT?
3. Will the state or local school systems pay for additional testing and scoring service?
4. Who will finance additional course offerings in basic skills areas, added personnel, materials, and space?⁷⁵

Girrbach and Claus strongly recommend that cost estimates, both financial and human, for the program be obtained prior to implementation.⁷⁶ Airasian, discussing the Massachusetts Basic Skills Improvement Program, noted that it was adopted without the need for reimbursement from the state.⁷⁷ Experience over the past four years has disproved this thought entirely. Additional costs for testing, remediation, and curriculum have not been supported financially by the state and have come directly from local budgets. Wylie recommends federal as well as state financial backing before any programs are implemented.⁷⁸ Lazar-Morrison reported on cost implementation of MCT programs and described four categories:

1. Legal
2. Implementation
3. Excess Burden for New Programs
4. Elimination of Desirable Elements from the Curriculum⁷⁹

Bunda reiterated the expensive cost of testing and remedial programs.⁸⁰

MCT General Issues

Nafziger proposed three main issues relating to the implementation of MCT programs:

1. General Education Issues
2. Implementation Issues
3. Evaluation Issues⁸¹

In terms of general education, MCT should support the conception about responsibility of education. Schools must provide sound educational programs as well as organized learning experiences and students must be responsible for their learning. MCT should match ongoing education programs and not add excessive educational, financial, or philosophical burdens. MCT goals need to be accomplished utilizing existing financial, human, and technical resources.

Implementation questions include the following:

1. What kind of competencies should be defined (e.g., life skills, basic skills)?

2. Who should have responsibility for defining the competencies?
3. How will standards be set?
4. Should tests be developed or selected?
5. Will tests be fair to special populations (e.g., racial, bilingual, handicapped)?
6. Who will administer the tests?
7. What type of scores will be reported?
8. Who will receive test results?
9. How will existing funds be used and how will programs be managed efficiently?
10. Will evaluation be formative or summative?
11. How will system know if goals are met?
12. What happens after MCT?

Evaluations of MCT are still in the early stages. Questions that need to be addressed are the following:

1. Are there changes in student achievement levels?
2. Are the costs of the program commensurate with the return?
3. Is the technical quality of the instruments adequate?
4. Are the competencies clearly important for insuring students future success?
5. Are the programs fair to all students?
6. Does the MCT program promote the goals of the curriculum?

Summary and Recommendations

This review of the literature in the field of MCT would be incomplete if it did not provide a summary of recommendations proposed by experts in the field. Accordingly, this agenda appears as follows:

1. MCT program purposes should be clearly stated at the beginning (e.g., certification for high school diploma, school system accountability, grade-to-grade promotion).
2. Specific competencies for program be specified, not simply life skills or basic skills.
3. Initially, competencies should be delegated to the areas of reading, math, and writing.
4. MCT policies should be carefully worded to avoid legal problems.
5. Standard setting procedures should be a community undertaking.
6. A range of educational, financial, and politically acceptable failure rates should be established before implementation.
7. Cost estimates should be obtained prior to implementation.
8. Effect of MCT on curriculum and instruction be carefully planned.
9. A wide range of community and educational personnel should participate in the MCT program.

10. Exceptional students (e.g., handicapped, bilingual, minority) should be given special consideration.
11. The validity and reliability of tests should be documented.
12. Promotion or graduation should not be mandated until pilot programs have been well established.
13. MCT movement has grown as a reaction to the belief that the schools were neglecting the basics and that scholastic standards were declining.
14. MCT programs impact most heavily on the scholastically weakest.
15. Schools should not wait until eighth grade to identify pupils needing help in minimal competencies. Testing should occur early and often.
16. Remedial programs should be established early, but systems with high minority populations should be careful to avoid resegregation.
17. Curricula must be developed or designed to foster competencies, however, other areas of the curriculum should not be neglected.
18. The testing of writing has proved most troublesome. Subjective scoring of writing samples is expensive and time consuming.

19. Writing test items, pilot testing, preparing sample tests, and field testing takes considerable time.
20. Advanced students need to be challenged to avoid the spectre of mediocrity.
21. Decision making needs to occur at the local level.
22. Model programs should be identified and disseminated for replication and modification.
23. Credentialing should be an ongoing process, not based on a single test.
24. Teachers should be provided with in-service education.
25. MCT should entail the administration of criterion referenced tests or performance tests.
26. Although MCT focuses on the lower third of the population, more capable students should be challenged.
27. Successful MCT programs require energetic personnel and efficient use of management, planning, and resources.
28. MCT will continue to generate substantial legal activity.
29. Several chances for taking the MCT should be provided.

30. MCT should be used along with course requirements and attendance for certification.

31. MCT should not be used to evaluate teachers.

A dissertation by Hayes comparing MCT in Illinois school districts found several important conclusions which summarize cogently the main points regarding MCT:

1. Competency testing and curriculum renovation go hand in hand; one complements the other.
2. Basic skills should be strongly stressed throughout a student's school years.
3. Paper and pencil tests are the easiest and cheapest methods of measuring competence.
4. Competencies should be measured early during school, thereby identifying students in need of remediation.⁸²

MCT is an important and significant educational movement which will experience growth and controversy in the years to come. As aptly stated by Pipho,

contradictions and controversy are evident at every turn, but then the minimum competency testing movement has no real parallel in the history of American Education.⁸³

This review of the literature has attempted to provide the major issues, concerns, and recommendations associated with minimum competency testing.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The research function is the momentous one of adding to human knowledge. Whereas some advancement of knowledge constantly occurs by accident, trial and error, shrewd reasoning or even intuition and imagination, historical experience clearly demonstrates that none of these has proved as efficient as research.¹

Rationale for the Methodology

Research design is defined as the plan, structure, and strategy of investigation developed to obtain answers to research questions.²

This chapter describes in detail the design of the investigation, which was divided into two separate parts. The first part consists of semi-structured interviews of a mixture of six educators and citizens within the Town of Bellingham, Massachusetts. The method used was in depth interviewing with each of the subjects and a culminating discussion among the six.

The primary data of in-depth, open ended interviews are quotations. What people say, what they think, how they feel, what they've done, and what they know -- these are the things one can learn from talking to people in interviews.³

The researcher was interested in obtaining from the participants their complete and honest perceptions of the impact of the Basic Skills Policy on the Bellingham School System.

Qualitative data consist of detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors; direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts.⁴

The second part of the study involved an opinion survey, which consisted of statements describing different aspects of the basic skills testing movement. This survey was administered to other teachers, parents, administrators, and students within the town of Bellingham.

Procedurally, the research undertook the following chronological steps:

1. The individual interviews were conducted.
2. The opinion survey was administered.
3. The group discussion was held.

Kerlinger supported this approach by stating:

Data collection methods can be categorized by the degree of their directness. Interviews and schedules (opinion surveys) are ordinarily quite direct. It is a strength because a great deal of the information needed in social scientific research is fairly straightforward and can be gotten from respondents by direct questions.⁵

The researcher in further questioning the most effective methodology decided to utilize qualitative interviewing because of the character and status of the topic being investigated. This study involved gathering the perceptions of participants in a highly specialized program. As a result, it was important to design a methodology that would permit a thorough exploration of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. As noted in

Chapter II, the literature review, there is considerable controversy and disagreement surrounding various aspects of the minimum competency testing movement. There are nuances of thoughts and feelings that could only be effectively explored through in-depth interviewing:

The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their terms.⁶

Since the purpose of this study was to assess the impact that the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy had on the perceptions of administrators, teachers, parents, and students in relation to a national movement toward competency testing.

The data are collected as open ended narrative without attempting to fit program activities or peoples' experiences into predetermined, standardized categories.⁷

Realizing, also, that to obtain a substantial enough sample of representative behavior to make valid statements, the researcher decided to support his interviews with questionnaires provided to large numbers of service providers. The researcher thought that a combination of qualitative data (obtained through interviewing) and quantitative data (obtained through an opinion survey), would provide more information than either method separately. Indeed, there was research support for this approach as mentioned by Denzin:

no single method ever adequately solves the problem ... because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. I now offer as a final methodological rule the principle that multiple methods should be used in every investigation.⁸

Development of the Interview Guide

The researcher, in beginning to conceptualize the design, needed to determine the type of interviewing that would be most applicable in the case.

Interviewing itself is an art, but the planning and writing of an interview schedule is even more of an art.⁹

He wanted to insure that the interviews were structured and standardized in order to maintain consistency across subjects. To accomplish this task, an interview guide needed to be carefully developed.

Standardized interviews use interview schedules that have been carefully prepared in advance to obtain information pertinent to the research problem.¹⁰

As mentioned by Patton:

The interview guide provides the topics or subject areas with which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject.¹¹

The general interview guide approach involved outlining a set of general issues that were to be explored with each respondent before interviewing began. The guide simply served as a checklist to insure that all relevant topics were covered. This approach presumed there was common

information that should be obtained from each person interviewed, but no set of standard, verbatim questions were written in advance. The researcher was thus required to adapt both the wording and sequence of questions to each participant in the context of the actual interview.

Because of the need for both structure and flexibility, the informal conversational interview (consisting of the spontaneous generation of questions) and the standardized open ended interview (carefully worded questions, limits for probing, designed for large numbers of people being interviewed) were deemed inappropriate.

After determining that the interview guide was the most suitable approach, the researcher needed to develop a format. Lofland suggested the following procedure in conceptualizing the guide:

1. Brainstorm concepts.
2. Communicate with personnel in the field of endeavor.
3. Develop a list of concerns (i.e., frustrations, conflicts, ambiguities, sources of satisfaction).
4. State common themes.¹²

The researcher then developed the guide (a copy of which may be found in Appendix E) with the following general areas to be explored:

1. The value of a basic skills program.

2. The importance of the program at the elementary and/or secondary level.
3. The effect on learning as a result of the Basic Skills Program.
4. Suggestions for Policy changes.
5. The effect of the program on the system's teachers and curriculum.
6. The value of state mandated or district tests, subject areas, grade levels, and standards.
7. Perceptions regarding promotion/graduation requirements.
8. Opinions concerning remedial services.
9. Feelings surrounding exemptions from testing.
10. Ideas pertaining to public participation and reporting.

The researcher developed this guide with the assistance of Massachusetts Department of Education Specialists (jury of experts) and Department of Education Publications on areas of greatest concern relating to basic skills. Consultation and final approval was obtained through the researcher's dissertation committee chairperson.

The researcher used ten general areas to explore in depth the perceptions of the participants toward basic skills. Since each area offered considerable room for exploration, the guide was used in a flexible manner with much opportunity for probing and alternative questioning.

Questions were adapted and revised as needed to provide maximum freedom as the specific interviews proceeded.

Selection of Participants

The researcher was interested in obtaining perceptions from four distinct groups as part of this study. These groups included: (1) administrators, (2) teachers, (3) parents, and (4) students.

The criteria for selection as a subject were based upon several different factors. There was not an attempt to choose the subjects randomly because of the nature of the specialized information needed to be obtained. Random sampling did not apply to this design because of the sophisticated understanding required of the subjects. The relevance of the subject matter to both the researcher and subjects was also taken into consideration. The researcher selected subjects who possessed knowledge of the Basic Skills Policy and who had direct experience with its procedures. Further, the researcher was acutely aware of the necessity for subjects to have the ability to clearly express their opinions and impressions.

People simply do not have an equal ability and willingness to make vivid the details and meaning of their lives. And while a good interviewer may be able to bring out the best in subjects, he or she cannot perform miracles on people who are not free with their words.¹³

Four key staff members were selected out of a school system with 187 members of the educational staff. The organizational structure of the system included a Superintendent of Schools, four building principals (three elementary, one high school), a Director of Special Services, two school psychologists, four guidance counselors, and 175 teachers. The specific personnel selected for the interviews included the following:

1. The Superintendent of Schools
2. The secondary guidance department head
3. An elementary teacher
4. The Basic Skills Coordinator/school psychologist

All of these staff members had been integrally involved with the Basic Skills Program since its inception and had a thorough knowledge of the history. It was felt that their ideas regarding the Policy provided an invaluable source for data generation.

In addition to the educational staff, consumers of the program were interviewed to gather their insights. Specific members of the community that were interviewed were the following:

5. A parent whose child had taken part in the Program.
6. A secondary student (senior) who had been exposed to the Policy.

The student and parent being interviewed were program consumers. By design, they were involved with the program since its inception. In this regard, the parent selected has two children who were tested in the sixth grade, 1983-84 (later elementary) and eighth grade, 1981-82 (secondary). This enabled the parent to observe changes from the elementary to the secondary level.

The student was a member of the senior class and she had participated in the testing as an eighth grade student. She had also served as the student representative on the Basic Skills Committee.

These conditions were felt to be important because it allowed sufficient time to elapse for the parent and student to experience the full impact of the program. Again, the parent and student were asked to share their thoughts, opinions, and feelings in relation to the Bellingham Basic Skills Program and how it was implemented. They were questioned regarding both positive and negative experiences encountered as subjects exposed to the Basic Skills Policy.

The rationale for choosing members of these divergent groups (administration, teachers, parents, students) was to obtain a range of opinions regarding the impact of the Basic Skills Policy. Because of their various roles and responsibilities in respect to the Policy, it was deemed important to accumulate different perceptions. The

researcher was interested in understanding how members of different groups (administrators, teachers, parents, students) reacted and responded to basic skills.

Selection of participants was also based upon subjects' willingness and interest to participate in the study along with their ability to commit the necessary time allotment for this project.

The researcher decided to include himself as a participant because of (1) his unique role as the Coordinator of the Basic Skills Program, and (2) his interest to conduct this particular research study. Because the researcher was already deeply involved with the Program, it seemed neglectful to ignore his perceptions. A substantial amount of literature related to qualitative research methodology stresses the importance of the researcher becoming involved in the topic under investigation.¹⁴

In qualitative methods, the researcher is necessarily involved in the lives of the subjects ... and even more than this involvement, the researcher must identify and empathize with his or her subjects, in order to understand them from their own frames of reference.¹⁵

Research Questions

Whenever a new educational program is adopted by a school system, there is often controversy and disagreement among the various factions the school system services.

Central administration may perceive a program in an entirely different fashion than a building principal, a classroom teacher, or a student. Since the Basic Skills Policy affected the entire gamut of personnel associated with the school system, similarities and differences of opinion were of interest to the researcher.

Analyzing these agreements and disagreements helped the researcher to better understand the factors most influential in the subjects' minds. The researcher was further interested in determining if traditional reactions anticipated by the groups would be substantiated.

1. Would administrators be more concerned with the organization and structural implementation of the program?
2. Would teachers be more focused upon instructional objectives and classroom techniques?
3. Would parents be more concerned with the eventual outcomes, i.e., will my son/daughter have enough preparation to enter college or successfully compete in the world of work?
4. Would students be primarily preoccupied with the immediate consequences of testing, i.e., will I not be permitted to graduate or will promotion be affected?

Description of Interview Procedures

The interview is a face to face interpersonal role situation in which one person, the interviewer, asks a person being interviewed, the respondent, questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to the purposes of the research problem.¹⁶

The actual interview process entailed a number of preliminary steps. The researcher needed to make a number of decisions in conceptualizing the interviews. The researcher utilized a jury of experts (Massachusetts Department of Education Specialists) and his dissertation committee chairperson to assist in the formulation of interview procedures. The process consisted of deciding what questions to ask, how to sequence questions, how much detail to solicit, how long to make the interviews, and how to word the actual questions. The researcher adopted Patton's strategy of providing a mixture of the following types of questions:

1. Experience/behavior questions, i.e., "If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing? What experiences with basic skills would I see you having?"
2. Opinion/value questions, i.e., "What is your opinion of the Basic Skills Policy?"
3. Feeling questions, i.e., "Do you feel frustrated by the amount of time that is necessary to spend on basic skills?"

4. Knowledge questions, i.e., "Could you explain the type of remedial services available if a student fails the Basic Skills Test?"
5. Sensory questions, i.e., "Describe the conditions within the classroom during the week of Basic Skills Testing."
6. Background/demographic questions, i.e., age, education, occupation, residence.

In addition to providing a combination of various types of questions, the researcher made careful note of the following criteria when actually developing specific questions for the interviews as stressed by Kerlinger:

1. Questions were related to the research problem and its related objectives.
2. Questions were clear and unambiguous.
3. The type of question was the right and appropriate one for the situation.
4. Leading questions and questions with social desirability were avoided.
5. Questions did not demand knowledge or information that the respondent did not possess or personally delicate material.

After deciding upon the types of questions and format, the researcher approached each subject and presented an oral summary of the study. Included in this presentation were (1) the purpose of the research, (2) the

reason for each subject's selection, and (3) each subject's resultant responsibilities. The researcher then obtained written approval for the interviews on a form which may be found in Appendix D. Subjects were informed that although their responses may be personally revealing, the researcher would make every effort to protect sensitive areas requiring confidentiality. The researcher stated that each subject would have access to the completed dissertation and that they were encouraged to criticize the final product. Each of the subjects chosen agreed enthusiastically to participate in the study and felt positive about their ability to express their feelings about the Basic Skills Program. The researcher and subjects then mutually agreed upon a date and site that would provide the most efficient and valuable information.

All interviews were conducted at the Bellingham School Administration Building. Between one and two hours were set aside for each interview. The researcher conducted the self interview first to avoid biased statements that may have been obtained from other interview responses. Each interview began with a complete description of the investigation as well as an explanation of the format of the interviews. The self interview was conducted in much the same fashion as the other interviews. The researcher/subject used the tape recorder to respond to questions from the interview guide and was allowed the

freedom to record anecdotal episodes as well as specific examples.

The interviewer made every effort to establish rapport and a relaxed, informal, and non-threatening climate was established so that the subjects were free to openly express their opinions and to share thoughts and perceptions.

The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is on someone's mind. The purpose of open ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind, but rather to assess the perspective of the person being interviewed.¹⁷

The researcher was acutely aware of the problem of confidentiality in the interview process. Since the interviewer was also the coordinator of the program, the issue of candid and honest remarks by the interviewee was of concern.

As an interviewer, I want to establish rapport with the person I am questioning, but that rapport must be established in such a way that it does not undermine my neutrality concerning what the person tells me.¹⁸

It should be noted that none of the interviewees were professionally evaluated by the interviewer. The interviewer had selected subjects who, in his opinion, were not only important sources of information, but also had the reputation for frank and open expression of viewpoints. In this regard, the researcher felt that the subjects chosen would feel more comfortable in expressing opinions which may be in disagreement with the researcher's. The

interviewer was not interested in "rubber stamp" approval of the program, but a forthright analysis of the assets and deficits by the participants. The interviewer was truly interested in obtaining data from personnel closely associated with the program to assess its impact on both service providers and consumers. The researcher realized that theoretically in his role as a "participant" and "supervisor" in the program, personnel may be inhibited from truly expressing their honest opinions. However, considerable time and effort were devoted in this role to assure personnel that open discussion of issues was of paramount concern. The researcher strongly felt that the selected subjects did, to the best of their ability, express both positive and negative feelings regarding the Basic Skills Policy.

The researcher obtained permission from each subject to tape record the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, each subject was given the opportunity to listen to the tapes. Although certain subjects felt somewhat uncomfortable with the recorder, they all agreed that an accurate representation of their words needed to be compiled. As Patton stated:

The use of the tape recorder does not eliminate the need for taking notes. Notes can serve two purposes:

1. To formulate new questions as the interview moves along, and,
2. To facilitate later analyses.¹⁹

Therefore, the researcher noted key phrases and developed a list of major points.

Data Analysis

After all six interviews were completed, multiple replays took place for the purpose of further note taking and transcription. The researcher took Patton's suggestion of transcribing only those quotations that were particularly important for data analysis and reporting. The data gathered during the interviews were analyzed using the topics included on the interview guide.

Data interpretation and analysis involves making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said.²⁰

Similarities and differences in opinions and perceptions were identified and significant personal reactions to the program were highlighted. A written summary of each interview was prepared and a copy was given to each subject.

The data was studied and analyzed using the inductive analysis approach. The nature of inductive analysis entails the development of conceptual categories. These categories arise from the actual information obtained from the study. They are grounded or formed in the data.

Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than

being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis.²¹

The categories for this study included areas such as:

1. Basic skills objectives and their relationship to the teaching process
2. Basic Skills Policy issues
3. Testing concerns
4. Remediation
5. Program Management

Group Interview

The group interview was conducted after the individual interviews. The researcher not only had the benefit of the responses from the previous individual interviews, but also had the completed opinion surveys from the other participants in the survey portion of the study. These were available for analysis and discussion in the group. Since each of the subjects had the advantage of already expending considerable thought regarding the Basic Skills Program as a result of the individual interviews, they were focused upon the priorities that needed elaboration. Once again, the researcher used the interview guide as a foundation to build upon during the group interviews:

The interview guide is especially useful in conducting group interviews. A guide keeps the interaction focused, but allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge.²²

It was noted that participants used each other's thoughts and feelings to stimulate further discussion and to make associations that were not observed during the individual interviews. At this point in the study, definite themes were emerging and the researcher was beginning to develop a flavor of priorities and major concerns. Some areas considered relevant at the outset remained important, while others diminished in importance as the data were reviewed. The physical arrangement for the group interview was seen as critical. The researcher found a circular arrangement to be most conducive to stimulate spontaneous conversation. Although the researcher served as the primary facilitator for the group interview, the informality that was consciously established allowed for the creative interplay among all participants. At the conclusion, the researcher expressed his gratitude toward all subjects for their time and energy devoted to the topic. All subjects reiterated their interest in providing useful information that would not only benefit the researcher's personal investment, but also would assist in contributing to systematic improvement.

Opinion Survey Development

The second phase of the study entailed the administration of an opinion survey to teachers, school and

district administrators and specialists, parents, and students who were involved with the implementation of the Basic Skills Policy. The researcher wanted to obtain additional data to either support or disclaim information gathered in the information process. As Kerlinger stated, "The most natural tool with which to compare the interview is the so called survey."²³ To begin the process, he researcher formulated a set of statements related to the concepts developed from the interview guide. Following suggestions from Hambleton,²⁴ he made a series of statements to be potentially suitable for the survey and reduced the final number of statements to twenty-nine, those being deemed the most efficient and relevant. Once again, the researcher consulted Massachusetts Department of Education Specialists and the dissertation committee chairperson in developing the survey.

The survey served primarily as a "check and balance" system for the researcher to insure that the perceptions obtained from the relatively small sample of interviews held true for a larger sample of similar populations.

The researcher is cautious in stating that both the interviews and surveys were not randomly standardized in a purely statistical sense. The researcher for the interviews deliberately selected subjects who had comprehensive knowledge about the Policy and who had the ability to

effectively communicate their ideas in a fluid and meaningful fashion.

If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours.²⁵

The surveys were applied to educators who had the most experience with the Policy. This entailed, for the most part, the teachers of those grade levels that were tested, as well as teachers of those grades immediately preceding and following. As an example, if the system required testing in grade three, those teachers as well as teachers in grade two (preparation) and grade four (remediation) were administered the survey. A study conducted by TDR Associates (8-83) for the Massachusetts Department of Education found that many educators in the Commonwealth had minimal knowledge of the Basic Skills Policy.²⁶ It was determined that the population with this limited knowledge emanated from those educators who were not integrally involved with the "test conscious" years. As a result of this precedent, this researcher wanted to obtain concrete information from those parties who had actual prior involvement with the Policy. Although the Policy does state that all educators and citizens should be concerned with the improvement of students' basic skills levels, it was felt that more substantial and pragmatic

data would be gleaned from those educators and citizens with direct involvement.

In addition to selecting target groups of educators, the researcher also applied this philosophy to the selection of students and parents. The researcher felt that twelfth grade students who had been exposed to the Policy during their entire secondary school career would be in a more advantageous position to comment on basic skills. It was felt that students from earlier grades may lack the understanding and maturity to present relevant thoughts regarding the Policy.

As stated in earlier, the researcher deliberately selected from the parent population, those parents who had a history of community involvement with the schools. Surveys were mailed to parents who had some type of involvement with active school affairs, such as Parent Teacher Organizations. Traditionally, these are the parents who are most vocal in relation to school matters and are the ones who really agitated to insure the quality of a high school diploma and to initiate school accountability for basic skills.

The researcher decided to design the survey as a fixed alternative or closed instrument, using a three point Likert-like scale with the following response modes: "Agree," "Not Sure," and "Disagree." A five point scale, with additions for "Agree Strongly" and "Disagree

Strongly," was considered unnecessary to add significant information to the results. Since the purpose of the survey was to supplement the data collected from the interview with the six subjects in the case study, and not to offer intensive narratives, it did not appear important to find the extent of the respondent's agreement with a particular statement. The researcher was mainly interested in using this data to corroborate or refute the impressions of the interviewing subjects.

Two surveys were developed (copies of which may be found in Appendices A and B). The reason for this procedure was because some of the technical information regarding Basic Skills. One survey was prepared for parents and students. The other survey was developed for teachers and administrators. Although individual statements differed, the categories (i.e., policy issues, remediation, testing, etc.) remained the same. The reliability of the survey within groups was tested. This was accomplished following procedural recommendations from Hambleton.²⁷ The statements were field tested on a small sample from each group and participants were asked to comment on the clarity and appropriateness of statements. Suggestions from Eiseman (a copy of which may be found in Appendix D) were incorporated into the final survey.

Opinion Survey Administration

The procedure followed by the researcher to administer the survey to the teachers and administrators was to request time at one of the monthly building principal's meetings. At these meetings, at the four different schools in the town, the researcher explained to the subjects the rationale for the study and obtained their written permission. All administrators (principals, department heads) completed the survey, along with the teachers most directly influenced by the Policy. Since testing occurred in grades three, six, and eight, the researcher sought responses from teachers in each of those grade levels as well as from the grade levels occurring immediately before and after the grade of testing. These grade levels were involved through preparation and remediation. A total of 67 staff members completed the surveys. This was the total population of the teaching (52) and administration (15) staff representing the relevant groups. The surveys were distributed at the meetings and the respondents were asked to complete them while the researcher waited. The time required for this arrangement was between 30 and 45 minutes. There was 100% completion. All staff fully agreed to participate. There were two teachers absent from the four meetings held. They were allowed to complete the survey at a later date, to which they willingly agreed.

Student participation was gained through the Director of Guidance. The researcher explained to the Director that he wished to have students participate in the study. The Director arranged for a meeting with members of the senior class psychology course in the high school auditorium during a period of the day. This represented a sample of 31 students from the total population of 197 high school seniors. These students were selected because of (1) their advanced academic standing -- as students in an honors course, they would be more articulate in regard to school system policies -- and (2) interest in the behavioral sciences. As psychology students, their willingness and interest in participating in a research study was strong. As with the teachers and administrators, explanations were given to the students as to the reason for the study and the students were asked to complete the survey while the researcher waited. This procedure took between 30 and 40 minutes.

Parents were selected for participation based upon their history of involvement with the school. Since the researcher was concerned about receiving an adequate response rate, he selected parents on the basis of their participation in school related activities such as the Parent Teacher Organization. The researcher was interested in obtaining information from each of the three elementary districts and the high school. Each PTO has on

the average six members so that the total population of active parents was 25. Members of these groups from each school were mailed the survey, along with a cover letter explaining the rationale and a request for permission to participate form. The respondents were asked to mail back the surveys and permission forms to the researcher. Twenty-five surveys were sent out and 20 were returned, making an 80% response rate.

Inductive Analysis

The nature of inductive analysis entails the development of conceptual categories. These categories originate from the actual information obtained from the study participants. They are grounded or formed in the data.

Evaluation reports based on qualitative methods will include a great deal of pure description of the program and the experiences of people in the program. The purpose of this description is to let the reader know what happened in the program, what it was like from the participants' point of view to be in the program, and what particular events or activities in the program were like.²⁸

The conceptual categories which were generated from the interviews and surveys were significant components of the subjects' perceptions of the basic skills movement. They comprise key areas which affect the daily functioning of the subjects in relation to basic skills.

The information was analyzed and scrutinized employing the process of inductive analysis.

Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. The analyst looks for natural variations in the data.²⁹

This methodology culminated in the classification of the data into a variety of categories. The information was further subdivided into two areas:

1. The primary data are those emanating from the interview.
2. The secondary data arose from the survey results.

Categories

The evaluation-analyst begins by looking for recurring regularities in the data. These regularities represent patterns that can be sorted into categories.³⁰

Reactions from interviewees and survey respondents signify their perceptions of a nationwide trend toward basic skills instruction as well as their specific notions pertaining to Bellingham's Basic Skills Improvement Policy. These categories are as follows:

1. Suitability of Establishing a Basic Skills Program
2. Public Dissatisfaction
3. Elementary versus Secondary Focus

4. Skills Acquisition
5. Effect of the Policy on Teachers and Curriculum
6. Focus of Basic Skills Testing
7. Promotion/Graduation Linkages to Testing
8. Exemptions
9. State versus Local Control
10. Remedial Services
11. Public Participation
12. Future Changes

Summary

In summary, the researcher described the cumulative design of the study, which consisted of six individual interviews, one group interview, and the administration of a survey. Where applicable, the researcher presented relevant literature (support for the techniques suitable for this type of investigation). This study included a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques that supplied the researcher with various kinds of data. This in-depth information will be organized, analyzed, and systematically presented in the next chapter. The material obtained for the qualitative interviews will be initially detailed. The data from the quantitative survey that are significantly in agreement or disagreement with the interview data will then be presented. Items from the survey that have particular

relevance to the major themes which developed from the interviews will be stressed. The data will be discussed according to the same categories which will be utilized in the presentation of the case study data.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The process of data analysis is to a major extent art and intuitive ... This effort at uncovering patterns, themes, and categories is a creative process that requires making carefully considered judgements about what is really significant and meaningful in the data. Since qualitative analysts do not have statistical tests to tell them when an observation or pattern is significant, they must rely on their own intelligence, experience, and judgement.¹

Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will present in detail the results of the study. As stated previously, the purpose of the study was to describe and analyze the opinions and perceptions of various educators and citizens towards the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy in the town of Bellingham, Massachusetts.

The task for the evaluation-analyst, then is to describe what actually happens to people in the program and what they say about what happens to them.²

The study was essentially divided into two segments: (1) interviews with selected administrators, teachers, students and parents, and (2) surveys distributed to members of the above stated groups.

The primary and most essential data were obtained through in-depth interviewing with six members of the

Bellingham school and local community. Individual interviews as well as a final group discussion/interview allowed for considerable thought and probing into the intricate aspects of the Basic Skills Policy.

In many qualitative evaluation projects, data on outcomes are gathered primarily or entirely through the use of in-depth interviews. What must be organized and presented are quotations from interviewees. Sufficient quotive data should be presented to illuminate and support whatever analysis the evaluation provides in narrative form.³

The individual interviews each began with a question about the subject's feelings concerning the suitability of establishing a Basic Skills Program in their school system and proceeded with subsequent questions regarding all aspects surrounding basic skills. Although the guide served as a point of reference and all topics were eventually discussed, the order of the questions varied according to the issues that arose spontaneously as the interviews progressed. As a result of these interviews, several major themes or categories took shape. The interviewees answered perceptively and deliberately each of the areas proposed by the researcher and contributed immensely to the understanding of perceptions regarding the field of basic skills. Included in the following sections will be the most pertinent descriptions and quotations of the interviewees.

Description and quotation are the essential ingredients of qualitative inquiry. Sufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow the reader to enter into the situation and thoughts of the people presented in this report.⁴

Suitability of Establishing a Basic Skills Program

The initial issue which the researcher explored with the subjects was the desirability of establishing a Basic Skills Program in the first place. Was it a good idea to have a formalized program or should it simply be assumed that the school system would automatically be attentive to the teaching of basic skills?

The response to this question was overwhelmingly on the side of setting up a formal operation. All participants strongly vocalized the need for a Basic Skills Program. This was true regardless of the respondents role (administrator, teacher, parent, or student).

When asked to verbalize the reasons for their opinions, frequent responses enunciated by the interviewees included:

1. identification of weakly prepared students,
2. increased development of curriculum, instruction and staff,
3. accountability of students, teachers, and administrators,
4. creation of better school-community relations,
5. accentuation of basic skills instruction in the schools,
6. certification of basic skills mastery prior to high school graduation,

7. promotion and incorporation of systematic testing in other grade levels,
8. improvement of school system standards.

Many interviewees stated that, left to their own resources, they did not feel that individual school systems would naturally focus on the critical importance of basic skills mastery. One of the administrators felt that unless there was a state mandate, implementation of a Basic Skills Program would be haphazard at best.

I believe I would have implemented a Basic Skills Testing Program because my philosophy since I became an educator has been that we need to test to determine how effectively our teachers are teaching and how effectively our youngsters are learning. I think the program initiated by the State served as an impetus particularly in those school districts where there was little testing being done. It has provided a consistent approach to evaluation statewide.

A fairly substantial number of academically inferior students may be overlooked.

The fact that we are mandated to test students for basic skills mastery in the early elementary, later elementary, and secondary levels allows us ample opportunity to identify those students who may be weak in either reading, math, writing, or listening and provide remedial services. I think the basic skills testing provides a solid check and balance system for informal assessment measures such as teacher observation and teacher made tests. If we didn't have to formally test, I don't think basic skills would be a priority and sadly, many students may be neglected.

In addition to identifying academically deficient students, on several occasions the issue of curricula,

instructional and staff development arose. One teacher stressed the importance of curriculum monitoring:

It's a good check on what's actually being taught and presented to the children and I think that by testing everyone in the system we get a measure of what each grade level is accomplishing.

The Policy was felt by one administrator to be of the most critical importance in the areas of instructional and staff improvement.

The greatest outcome of the Basic Skills Policy in my eyes has been its impact on teaching personnel. Prior to the start of the Policy in 1980, we had very few in-service programs related to improved teaching skills in the classroom. Since that time, each year our teachers have at least one course as well as several in-service half days dealing strictly with basic skills, whether reading, math, or writing. This staff development program has translated into better acquisition of basic skills for all our students.

From the parental perspective, accountability was the major issue, not only in relation to what skills the schools should provide, but also the proportion of student responsibility.

The schools belong to the townspeople. We pay the taxes and a large portion of that money goes to the schools. Administrators should make sure that teachers are spending enough time in their classes on reading, writing, and math. It is my responsibility as a parent to create a positive attitude about school at home. It's my children's responsibility also to pay attention in class, behave, and complete their work. Accountability for everyone involved is the key.

The student echoed this concern over responsibility:

Parents should be concerned and want to know if their kids will be prepared when they graduate from high school.

All interviewees felt strongly that a Basic Skills Program was important at both the state and local level. One respondent expressed that the data obtained from all the communities in the Commonwealth would assist the Department of Education in making statewide decisions relative to basic skills. If the state had information from all the cities and towns, it would be in a better position to assist local school districts with direction and guidance.

It was suggested by an administrator that school systems should go a step further in the assessment process. It was felt that more comprehensive testing programs dealing with higher order skills as well as basic skills should be incorporated into school system's policies and procedures.

I think we should have a Basic Skills Policy in this district but I don't think we should only focus on minimum basic skills. I think we need to test more broadly to get at all skills levels rather than just basic skills.

The area of school-community relations was seen to be important in relation to the initial thrust of the program. Since the public wanted to be assured that high school graduates would be certified in at least the

mastery of minimal basic skills, a Basic Skills Policy was viewed as the means to improve school-community relations. It was suggested that since the Policy was implemented in 1980, the public felt more comfortable with the fact that tangible evidence (i.e., test scores) was now available relative to the attainment of basic skills. Prior to that time, the public had only subjective variables available that could often be misinterpreted. It was further suggested that with the refinements in the evaluation process, each year the standards of the schools were increasing.

I think we have improved the administration of the Program and obtained better results each year. We used those results through analysis to increase our expectations of students and to improve our curriculum offerings.

Public Dissatisfaction

There was a preponderance of opinion that the public was justified in criticizing the schools for de-emphasizing the instruction of basic skills in the 1960's and 1970's. However, the reasons for the lessening of attention in basic skills were complex. The situation was not seen as a crystal clear issue, but rather one with many nuances.

I think the public was on target to push the issue of basic skills, but also I think there were more and more demands being placed on the teachers. Societal and technological changes

shifted the focus away from basic skills. The three R's of old were taken for granted. As we added more and varied objectives to our daily routine, we weren't as attentive to the basic three R's of learning.

Participants all agreed that the thrust for a "back to basics" educational approach was a national phenomenon rather than specifically oriented to either the state of Massachusetts or the town of Bellingham.

I think the schools reflected society's demands at the time. In the late 1970's there was a trend in education to be more lax and throughout our community, I think. The schools reflected that. Open campuses were at their high point. For instance, in our high school, students in grades 11 and 12 were allowed all types of elective courses -- which didn't focus on basic skills at all. Electives were more popular than mandated courses. I noticed it also in the recruiting process. In 1978, a recruiter pointed out to me that the demands of new enlistees was at its low point. The basic training that was required of all new enlistees was shortened. Also, in industry and the sciences, the United States was being overshadowed by foreign nations. Better performance was required overall in the nation, not just the schools.

Teachers and administrators noted changes in the basic fabric of society. Schools were being forced to adopt a number of different roles which previously were the domain of the family or social service agencies. Because the schools became responsible for the roles of psychologist, nurse, day care provider, counselor, etc., considerable emphasis (economic and philosophical) was placed on the needs of the "whole child." Money and

instructional time were being diverted to these non-academic areas and away from the hiring of teachers to deal with basic skills. As one top level administrator highlighted:

I think the public schools have been expected to provide a great deal of service in social areas. In the past several years, a great deal of pressure has been exerted from the public at large for the schools to provide instruction in the areas of drug and alcohol awareness and sex education. I feel we could hire a full-time psychiatrist to address all the social problems in the schools. The public has asked the schools to move into areas that they were not qualified for. As a result, the curriculum was watered down and there was a real need to refocus on basic skills.

Participants were cautious, however, in making judgements regarding the appropriateness of these other services. Most agreed that the schools were the logical receptacles for these services if they were not being provided elsewhere. They simply felt that if these other factors were taken into consideration, then the schools were placed in an unenviable position of trying to not only respond to social and psychological requirements, but also to an equally pressing demand from this very society to improve upon the basic skills knowledge of students. As one teacher aptly stated:

I felt torn between my responsibilities as a teacher to instruct basic skills, but yet to be empathetic to a girl who might be having some terrible home social problem.

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Teachers are placed in a dichotomous position. Trying to be a teacher and a counselor at the same time is difficult. In one fashion, you're trying to make sure that students adhere to certain rules and regulations, while at the same time trying to be the youngster's friend and ally. That can sometimes be a very conflicting role situation.

Elementary versus Secondary Focus

Another area of concern to the researcher was the interviewees' thoughts regarding the most appropriate level to address in the instruction of basic skills. Since the State Policy required that testing be accomplished at three grade levels, but allowed local discretion in determining specific grades within the early elementary (K-3), later elementary (4-6), or secondary (before January of grade 9), the researcher was interested in obtaining perceptions of priorities in the eyes of the participants.

The researchers asked each respondent to comment on their feelings regarding evaluation and remediation at the elementary and secondary levels. There existed strong opinions across all roles that the Policy should be implemented at both the elementary and secondary levels. The most prevalent reason was that testing at the elementary and secondary levels promotes continuity and makes it possible to monitor progress in basic skills attainment at all levels. As one top level administrator observed:

I think we should have it at both levels to keep track of the total educational process. I think if we only tested at the secondary level, we couldn't pinpoint how effective the instruction was prior to students entering the high school.

Frequently testing was also mentioned by some participants as a means of creating a "test conscious" atmosphere which in many instances may reduce "test anxiety."

I know when basic skills testing first occurred by daughter did poorly because this was her first opportunity to take a standardized test. She became nervous and froze in the testing situation. Now that the tests have become part of the routine each year and the teachers are able to place their importance in perspective, my daughter does not become as tense and therefore has performed better.

Testing at the three levels was also seen as an accountability mechanism for the schools. It ensured the public that somewhere in the early elementary, later elementary, and secondary levels, all students would be tested. This would demonstrate not only specific student deficiencies, but more importantly the effectiveness of the instructional process. By being required to publicly report on the number and percentages of students at those levels who passed and failed, the public would be provided with a gauge of the school system's attention to basic skills.

It's a check and balance procedure. The public wanted to know how effectively schools were teaching basic skills. We report to the school committee at a public session, how many of our students are achieving minimal levels. It keeps the schools sharp and reminds them of their charge.

By testing in the early elementary, later elementary, and secondary, we have the opportunity to establish a consistent program that can be monitored systemwide.

Interestingly, all participants also stated that testing and remediation at the elementary level was of critical importance. They reasoned that by identifying "high risk" youngsters at as early an age as possible, efforts toward remediation could take place.

I feel strongly that we have to focus it at the earlier level. I think at times we overlook the critical things that are taught at the elementary grades, thinking that at some point in time they'll all catch up. Then, realizing at the high school level there's a gap and that these basics aren't retaught and hence you have an eleventh grader not any better than a fourth grader.

The parent was in favor of evaluating basic skills at officially a much earlier grade level than was presently being tested (grade 3). She felt that the local school system was in a more advantageous position to find remedial youngsters by testing comprehensively at each grade level, beginning in kindergarten.

I feel that in Bellingham we exceed the State's basic skills requirements. If we only tested once at each of those levels, a lot of kids might fall through the cracks. Now that we test every year starting in kindergarten, parents have a better understanding of their children's basic skills needs.

One concern with the present statewide Policy was the fact that the emphasis had been placed more directly at

the secondary level. The state has developed a secondary test that has been utilized in a vast majority of school systems. The elementary levels are not provided with a state test and must either develop their own or purchase a commercially made instrument. The state developed a set of minimal objectives for reading, math, writing and listening at the secondary level, but failed to develop such a list for the elementary. Retesting until a student passed was required at the secondary level, but not at the elementary. This left one systemwide administrator with mixed reactions.

I can understand that society ultimately wants these students to function successfully and therefore high school level basic skills need to be adequately developed. But in order to get there, mastery of basic skills at the elementary level needs to take place. I think the Department of Education shortchanged the elementary schools when developing the Policy. They were left with little direction or guidance. They had to choose their own tests and develop their own objectives. This was done for the secondary schools. It would have made greater sense to have a set of objectives and tests for the elementary as well.

Skills Acquisition

The next area that the researcher explored with the interviewees concerned the attainment of basic skills for students specifically within the town of Bellingham. This was not so much a policy issue as an implementation

effect. The researcher wanted to determine if there was a general perception that students in Bellingham were learning any more effectively as a result of the Basic Skills Policy. He wanted to inquire about specific skills improvement and to ask the respondents to justify their statements (i.e., what skills if any have improved and on what do you base your statement?).

There was unanimous agreement among all participants (administrators, teachers, parents, and students) that since the Basic Skills Program was enacted in 1980 there was a gradual, yet perceptible increase in the quality of basic skills attainment. The administrators and the teachers based their arguments on hard data, such as improved test scores.

I have noticed improvement in all the areas of basic skills -- reading, writing, math. We are reporting greater proportions of students passing each year. The teachers have received in-service training in all three areas and have been directing more time to basic skills instruction in class.

The parent and student echoed the feeling that overall basic skills acquisition had improved but based their statements on more informal measures, such as personal observation.

My children have definitely benefited from the systematic approach to the teaching of writing. When I go for teacher conferences, the teachers show me the compositions my children have written during the year and I can see the growth. The papers they bring home from school

are more legible and they now know how to write meaningfully.

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When I was in grammar school, I couldn't write well at all. When they started making us use those writing folders, I thought it was unfair to make us write so much. Now that I'm a senior, I can see that all that effort really paid off.

One administrator also attributed the new high school graduation minimum requirements (four years English, two years math, two years science, two years social studies) as contributing to improved basic skills scores.

When asked to specify what skills were most effected by the Basic Skills Program, the area of writing was repeatedly emphasized.

One of the principal weaknesses identified through the basic skills testing was writing skills. Over a period of time, we have concentrated on improving this area. That's being accomplished through (1) in-service training, (2) explaining to teachers the need to provide more opportunity to write, (3) principals monitoring of the cumulative writing folders.

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Teachers are spending more time teaching writing in an organized fashion, not haphazardly and our test results have shown that. The in-service programs have been eye opening and profitable.

As a result of lowered test scores during the initial four years of the Policy, a comprehensive Writing Program that required teachers to allow students to write much more frequently and in a more systematic fashion was developed. Cumulative writing folders were held for each student and these were transferred from each grade level

as the student progressed to document areas of strength and weakness.

Effect of the Policy on Teachers and Curriculum

As a state mandated program, the researcher was concerned about the Basic Skills Policy's impact on teachers and the teaching process. Did the teachers change the focus of their instruction and, if they did, was it seen as beneficial? Also, in terms of the teacher evaluation process, what impact did test scores have on administrators' evaluations of teachers?

All interviewees queried felt that the Policy had a positive effect on teaching. It was mentioned that teachers were allotted more time to spend on fundamentals and that translated into improved student performance. The curriculum and instruction renovations that accompanied the implementation of the Policy were viewed as important elements.

I think the Basic Skills Program has served as an impetus for us to take a good look at our total curriculum. In-service training in writing, reading and testing has occurred. We're taking a good look at the Teacher Assisted Instruction (TAI) program for math.

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The entire curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels has been modified. The high school staff spent several in-service days revamping the curriculum in all areas and presented that to the school committee. At the elementary level, we've taken a look at the different objectives in the curriculum guides

for the teachers and tried to update those objectives that are more meaningful in the 1980's.

A general sense of "awareness and importance" of basic skills attainment was suggested as a result of the Policy. Through the comprehensive in-service programs, teachers felt more confident in developing procedures to identify and remediate academically deficient students.

Although a general "consciousness raising" was seen, one administrator felt that it was more limited to those teachers directly responsible for either the test preparation, the testing itself, or the remediation efforts.

Honestly, upper grade level teachers at the high school do not come in contact with basic skills testing and therefore do not have as much interest. They hear about it at faculty meetings, but it really doesn't affect them directly. The teachers at the grade levels that are tested are well informed about the Program. Also, the teachers at the grade levels right before and right after the years for basic skills take a more involved attitude.

The teacher felt strongly that the "accountability" issue motivated teachers to stress the teaching of basic skills. The fact that scores would be publicly revealed and instructional procedures carefully scrutinized by administration demanded that teachers be more precise and objective in their teaching styles.

Teachers are paying more attention to detail for example in using their writing folders. They know they're going to be checked and that there will be more testing and I think it comes down to basic accountability. No one wants to look

bad. Knowing the results are being presented to the Superintendent and the townspeople to judge has made people take note of what they're doing in their classrooms.

The parent expressed the opinion that the return to basics helped the teachers to prioritize their teaching objectives. The parent was of the view that there previously had existed too much flexibility and teacher discretion in the classrooms. With so many allowances for variety and variability throughout the curriculum, the parent felt that the teachers did not know where their focus should be placed.

Before the Basic Skills Program was adopted, my children spent a great deal of time doing non-academic activities. Although I'm in favor of socialization, they were spending too much time during the school day in art, music, gym, study, free time, etc. Once the program was adopted, they still received these activities, but to a lesser emphasis. A greater portion of their day was spent simply doing reading, writing, and math.

The perception of the student regarding the Program's impact on the teachers revealed a mixed message. On the one hand, as a senior, she was pleased with the fact that throughout her high school career, teachers in most subjects stressed basic skills. She realized that this emphasis prepared her to successfully develop solid work-study habits and test taking knowledge. However, she was somewhat disappointed by the rigidity of her course schedule and lack of appealing electives.

There's no doubt that at this high school teachers are constantly reviewing fundamentals. Even though I'm in mostly honors classes because I'm a member of the National Honor Society, teachers are always concerned about grammar, spelling, and punctuation. This can be frustrating at times, but at least it makes us aware of our mistakes and I think it helped me with my SAT scores. The only thing that I regret is the fact that with the new high school graduation requirements and the attention for basic skills, most of the kids don't have time and the school doesn't offer as many electives as they did before.

Particularly relevant in relation to the Policy's impact on teachers was the evaluation process. Are teachers being assessed formally or informally on the basis of their students' test scores? This question was solidly addressed to the administrators and teachers. For both roles, there was the perception that during the earlier years of the Policy, teachers were more suspicious and anxious about test scores affecting their performance evaluations.

I think initially many teachers viewed testing as a means of checking up on their effectiveness in teaching. I think that has changed substantially since we developed comprehensive testing (K-12). The teachers have begun to realize we are attempting to use those results to improve instruction. We've begun to provide teachers with the information they need to perform better in the classroom. My opinion is that the perception of teachers has changed tremendously within the past few years because they've begun to trust the administration in terms of what we're trying to do in the testing process. There is also a greater effort on the part of the principals to analyze the test results and to assist teachers who may not be providing the right kind of instruction. Guidance by the

principal, observing other teachers where successful teaching is taking place, and in-service programs are steps we've taken to assist our teachers to improve their teaching of basic skills.

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I think that because the Policy has been in place for a few years, my colleagues don't see it as a threat anymore. They feel more comfortable in the fact that any student's score cannot solely be judged by what they have taught that particular year. It's a cumulative effect. How a student performs at the end of third grade is a result of instruction from kindergarten through third grade. A lot of learning took place in previous years, with both positive and negative results. Certainly, the teachers that I have spoken with have not been hindered by any means in the teacher evaluation process.

The effective use of test results by teachers was also pursued by the researcher. Were the results relevant and beneficial in terms of educational planning. In the research, there are many occasions when teachers reveal that (1) standardized test scores do not coincide with my evaluations of the students' daily progress or (2) the results that they obtain from the testing company are so complex and statistical in nature that they are of minimal practical value. Was this the case with basic skills?

Once again, this area was directed to the administrators and teachers. It was not posed to the parent and student because of their lack of expertise in this domain. There was a consensus that the particular results from this town's basic skills program were demonstrably practical and usable.

We use the Stanford Achievement Test to evaluate basic skills at the elementary level. The children who perform poorly on that test are the ones that I would have referred for special help. The students who are conscientious and bright in the class, also do well on the tests. I think it's a good match for what we teach in class.

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As an administrator, I was concerned that teachers did not have the skills to interpret test results. We tried to overcome this area of fear and reluctance on the teachers part, by providing an in-service program for them. A representative from the testing company presented a very practical and worthwhile program that the teachers could understand. More importantly, they were able to go back to these classes, look at their results and, provide specific remediation for deficient skills.

Also, we were able to obtain a computer printout for each student of not only his statistical test scores, but also a narrative report that explained in non-technical language the students' strengths and weaknesses. This has been provided to each parent and has been enormously successful in bridging the gap between the test scores and the interpretation of them.

The researcher was also interested if the Policy was seen as a burden or as too time consuming for the teachers. When any program is mandated, whether on the local, state, or national level, there is resistance to change and certain feelings among the staff that these requirements are too demanding and are stretching them in too many directions. Was this the case with basic skills? Did the teachers feel that they were being required to adopt another in a series of mandated programs that was

overwhelming to them? There was a consensus that attention to basic skills was important, but the bureaucratic and administrative procedures required as a result of the Policy were seen as impediments.

I'm content with the amount of time devoted to basic skills. I agree that it had to be increased. Our job as educators is to prepare students for success in the outside world. I think teachers needed that direction to be more attentive for what they should be teaching. But there's a limit too. The administration wants us to spend more time with basic skills, but at the same time they want us to teach sex education, alcohol awareness, computers, etc. It's really hard to accomplish everything. With basic skills we have to make sure that everyone is tested, which means doing make-ups, provide special accommodations for special needs and bilingual students, and report every year. There's so much paperwork involved that it interferes with teachers' time to do what they do best -- TEACH!

Finally, it was mentioned by one administrator that with the myriad of remedial services provided within the school system, the Basic Skills Program was supplementary at best. Because the teachers had the opportunity to refer students at any grade level for extra help if they were performing poorly, he questioned the wisdom of establishing yet another testing program.

In my opinion, classroom teachers are the best judge of students' problems. They don't necessarily need a test to identify which of their students are doing well and which are doing poorly. We have Chapter One, Special Needs, Remedial Reading, and late bus help. The teachers don't always need those tests to tell which students should get help. I think the standardized testing helps confirm a teacher's

suspensions, but in the long run, I'd put my money on the teacher's assessment of daily progress, rather than the test results. In the best of both worlds, they probably should complement each other.

Focus of Basic Skills Testing

The original intent of the Basic Skills Policy was to ensure that every student in Massachusetts possessed minimal skills in the areas of reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking prior to his/her high school graduation. Reading, writing, and math were required to be evaluated right from the start. Listening skills were delayed until the 1982-83 school year. Speaking was to occur at an even later date, but has since been dropped as a skill to be tested. Teachers throughout the state participated in Massachusetts Department of Education workshops on the evaluation of speaking during the 1983-84 school year. Although the consensus from the workshops was that speaking was an essential skill for students to acquire, the time element for testing (ranging anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes per student) was viewed as a considerable drawback. As a result, the Department of Education delayed and eventually dismissed the testing of speaking skills.

There has existed considerable debate, nationally, as well as across the State of Massachusetts in regard to not

only what are minimal skills necessary to cope in society (i.e., definitional concerns), but also how school personnel should evaluate those skills. As mentioned previously in Chapter II, there are proponents for the teaching of enabler skills (the application of basic skills to real life situations -- balancing a checkbook, analyzing a newspaper article, etc.). Also, choices of test situations include: actual performance situations, simulated performance situations, student products review, or pencil and paper tests.

This researcher asked the four role models (teacher, administrators, parent, and student) to reflect upon the current focus of basic skills areas as well as the testing methodology. The majority of respondents stated that they felt comfortable with the present emphasis on reading, writing, math, and listening as well as the type of testing that was being performed. One administrator expressed strong feelings in this regard:

There's no doubt in my mind that oral and written communication skills are perhaps the most important types of instruction we can provide for our students to be successful in careers after graduation, in the world of work or higher education. I feel that objective tests are certainly adequate for the evaluation of reading, math, and listening. However, I'm a strong advocate for student products for writing. I think having students present writing samples which will be holistically scored by a panel of experts is the most effective way to evaluate writing.

This perception was closely aligned with other respondents views. Although actual writing exercises were preferred over objective paper and pencil tests in this area, there did not exist an across the board opinion that school products or enabler skills should be tested. The greatest barrier to this was seen to be the time factor.

One participant offered this thought:

If we had to test every student in an actual work-like situation, it would be overwhelming, both in terms of time and expense. There wouldn't be any time left to teach. I see the core academic subjects as being essential to test. If students can master them they will be able to translate that knowledge to a real life situation after high school.

The assessment of speaking also drew widespread criticism more because of the time factor than the desirability of the skill. The teacher noted the following:

I think it would be difficult to judge speaking. I attended a two-day workshop on speaking which I found valuable, but I question the necessity of testing everyone in speaking. We have speech therapists in the schools who can evaluate students who may have speaking problems. I would like us to focus on the key curriculum areas: reading, writing, math.

Promotion/Graduation Linkages to Testing

Perhaps the most controversial issue surrounding the basic skills movement has been whether to tie grade to grade promotion or high school graduation to the passage of minimum competency exams. As reported in other

studies, this researcher also found ambivalent reactions. Currently, the Policy does not mandate grade retention or diploma denial. The researcher questioned each of the interviewees on the wisdom of both decisions. They were asked to respond to each area (retention, graduation) separately, since they conceivably could have favored the passage of the test as a stipulation for graduation, but opposed year-to-year promotion. Respondents were also asked to elaborate on the reasons for their decisions.

Among the various rationales given in opposition to grade promotion were the following:

1. A single test should not be the only determining factor. The parent who noted that she had a "test anxious" child felt it would be unfair to prevent her daughter from passing a grade if she had accomplished the course objectives as determined by the teacher.

Two years ago my daughter made the honor role but failed certain portions of the basic skills test because she did not test well. In that case, she would have stayed back. Last year she also made the honor roll. It would have been a great mistake to keep her back.

2. The student's daily productivity is a more accurate gauge of basic skills mastery than the test. Several interviewees mentioned that teacher assessment either alone or preferably in

conjunction with test results should be used to determine a student's fate. The teacher stressed the point that promotions should be based on a number of interacting factors:

I don't think it (the test) should be the one deciding factor, but should definitely be used with other information such as the student's report card grades, effort, ability, and teacher judgement. I think the test could be a very influential factor in a case that has come down to the wire. If results come back low, I would think you would have to use that as criteria for staying back.

3. Individual learning styles and rates should be considered. One administrator addressed the concept of student groupings and non-graded settings.

The type of school organization we have presently is not the ideal way of grouping students. The non-graded movement is based on the premise that students learn at different rates. Therefore, we ought to teach skills that students can master at their own developmental level. They would only move on after mastery and promotion wouldn't tie into it. A student moves to a new level after he has experienced success at a lower level.

4. The tests should be used for diagnostic purposes, not punishing ones. Since the Policy's intention was to focus on success rather than failure, it was noted that remedial efforts should be prioritized. The student suggested that:

Teachers should spend more time helping those students who fail. Extra help after school or by tutors should be given rather than keeping those students back as a way of punishing them.

5. Psychological damage to the student's self-esteem may occur. This is closely allied with the previous concern. Several interviewees were reluctant to retain a student after the primary school years because of the stigma that it creates.

Many youngsters would become discouraged if not promoted. Students that would be 14 or 15 and still at the sixth or seventh grade level would create problems for themselves, their peers and the teachers.

One administrator interviewed was in favor of retention based upon basic skills test scores. He expressed several reasons for his decision:

1. Students should be held accountable each year for mastery of basic grade level objectives.
2. Social promotion of students is unrealistic and in the long run damaging to students.
3. The passage of a test would negate personality and teaching styles that cater to the affective domain.
4. Teachers would be assured at the beginning of each school year that students would possess at least minimal basic skills for that grade level.

I feel strongly that the time has come for educators to be more demanding and assertive in terms of student expectation. The Basic Skills Policy in 1980 was a step in the right direction. Now, the time has come for those of us in education to stand behind the demand from the public. We have to stop coddling students and forcing teachers each year to accept poorly prepared learners.

The situation with graduation requirements also elicited contradictory opinions. Whereas promotion was more clearly perceived as deleterious by the participants, the graduation issue was less neatly defined. There was a mixed reaction across all role models. On several occasions, the same member argued for and against the question, indicating its perplexing nature. Many participants viewed this question as a "grey" area, with both advantages and disadvantages.

Among the reasons for advocating the linkage of the test to the diploma were the following:

1. The diploma would become more relevant and meaningful.
2. Employees and colleges would be assured that high school graduates would be capable of their minimal entrance requirements.
3. A statewide test would demonstrate to the public that the schools were being held accountable and that consistency of expectations was being maintained.

4. Students would become more responsible leading to high quality graduates.
5. Remedial efforts would become more conscientious and effective if students realized that the "extra help" would ultimately affect their future.

Cogent statements issued by participants relative to the above concerns were as follows:

I feel very strongly about graduation. There is no conceivable reason why we should not expect a graduating senior to be held responsible for passing a minimum competency test. If they have spent four years at the high school it is not unreasonable to expect and demand that before we certify that they can function adequately in society, they should demonstrate that to us by passing a test.

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If they knew they had to pass a test, not just pass courses, I think students would take a more responsible attitude toward their studies. If they weren't doing well, they would cooperate better with remedial specialists knowing that their fate was in their hands.

Opposition to tying high school graduation to the successful completion of a basic skills test was expressed for several reasons, which closely paralleled the documentation for retention:

1. A single test should not determine the fate of a student who has persevered in a high school setting for four years.

2. Student learning styles vary considerably and it would discriminate unfairly upon the disadvantaged, handicapped, and bilingual youngsters.
3. Psychological and sociological harm would be inflicted, such as students dropping out of school early, realizing they would be unable to pass the test. These students would experience a greater likelihood of social transgressions (drug, alcohol, and community abuse).
4. Potential legal dilemmas stemming from diploma denial.

Pertinent comments by participants included:

It would be grossly unfair for a student who has successfully completed all the requirements to be denied a diploma because he/she failed one test. They've devoted a substantial amount of their life to meeting the academic demands of the school. They spent at least 20 years of their time and bargained in good faith with the faculty. All of a sudden, they have to become accountable once again, in an artificial environment, for what they've already proven they have mastered.

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I know a lot of the lower level students that I have taught over the years would have dropped out if they knew they had to pass a test to graduate. Most of these kids have never done well on tests and the very thought of a test to measure whether they are competent to function in society would scare them to death.

The general consensus of the interview participants was that the time had come for passing a basic skills test before dispensing a high school diploma. This was solidly

expressed by the parent, student, and teacher. The administrators were less inclined to wholeheartedly adopt this viewpoint. It appeared that they were more cautious in looking at the potential psychological, social and legal ramifications.

Grade to grade promotion based upon successful completion of the basic skills test was seen as a drastic measure by all role models. Although certain advantages were discussed, when asked to base their decisions for promotion solely on the passing of a test, all interviewees hesitated. All felt more confident in utilizing a combination of assessment devices including test scores, teacher judgement, report cards, and student ability.

Exemptions

The Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy, since its beginning, has allowed local school systems to exempt two categories of students: (1) special needs and (2) bilingual. Students that have individualized educational plans or have limited English ability may be allowed to take the test in a modified fashion or be exempted entirely from the process. The researcher wanted to determine if the interviewees felt that these exemptions were reasonable and if they could articulate reasons why they should be relieved of the testing process.

There was unanimous agreement among all roles (teacher, administrators, parent, student) that special needs as well as bilingual youngsters should be given special consideration. To hold those populations accountable would be unfair and unreasonable given their delimiting conditions.

If students can't cope because of a language, intellectual, or physical barrier, they shouldn't be forced into taking a test which will only result in a failure experience for them.

However, the degree of hardship was mentioned by one participant. He felt certain special needs and bilingual students would have the capacity to take the test under normal classroom conditions.

There are many students that have been placed in the special needs program because of attitude and motivation problems. They're not doing well because of behavioral reasons, not learning disabilities. These kids have at least average IQ levels but they don't care about school. They should be required to take the test.

Students who have serious language barriers should definitely be exempted. But I'm a strong believer in being immersed in the language. If students have been in this country for several years, they should be weaned from the bilingual program and be integrated in the normal classroom environment.

The Policy also allows for local discretion in terms of test condition modification. All interviewees stated that they were in favor of modifying the test conditions

for special needs and bilingual youngsters. These modifications included taking the test in a smaller setting, directions explained more precisely, oral responses as opposed to written, extending time elements, etc.

These students need to be given every opportunity available to succeed in the testing process. It is a real advantage that the system allows for modifications. Otherwise, these students would never be capable of entering into a test situation.

It was noted by one administrator that the time constraints allowable for the regular student population should also pertain to the special students:

There are some students who will take advantage of test modifications. They realize that taking the test with a teacher who will allow any disruptions is preferable to taking the test under normal standardized test conditions. If I can take as much time as I want, why should I take the test under time limitations?

Modifying test conditions for moderate special needs students, although seen as necessary, was also viewed as extremely time consuming.

These special needs students would not pass given the regular classroom procedures. I'm convinced that taking the test in the resource room with a supportive and nurturing teacher provides more valid results than if these students were required to take the test in the regular class. They feel comfortable and more willing to take risks and make mistakes.

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The only problem is that it takes a lot of time to test all those kids. We have to look at which subject areas each student may need modification and schedule it. Some can handle math, others reading, and still some others writing. Special test conditions takes a considerable amount of organizing and scheduling.

State versus Local Control

The question of state versus local control of school systems has had a prolonged impact on the instruction of students in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This researcher was predominantly interested in where the domain of control should be centered. Although the history of Massachusetts Education has revealed a spirit of local control individualization, the Massachusetts Legislature has found it necessary to impose at least minimum standards on the state's public school students.

There were three main areas that were discussed in relation to state or local control: (1) tests -- should all school systems be required to take the same test? -- (2) grade levels -- should all school systems be required to test at the same grade level? -- (3) standards -- should there be uniform pass/fail standards for all school systems? In other words, should there be greater control at the state level?

In relation to the selection of tests there were conflicting opinions. One administrator spoke of the differentiated needs of the vast number of cities and towns within the state.

I think schools need to adopt tests that are suited to their needs. If you go to a standardized process across the state, it will be difficult to develop a comprehensive test that will be suitable to the 350 communities.

This argument was countered by another administrator who expressed the opinion that public relations would not improve until all cities and towns adopted the same test.

I am entirely in favor of all school systems using the same tests. These results are publicized and people use them for their own interests. Until the same test is given, there's no way to judge the quality of a program or student because there's so much fluctuation in the statistics.

One teacher expressed the view that consistency and the validity of a public school education would be enhanced.

It would provide consistency and people would know what to expect. The public is trying to make comparisons now with a wide variety of tests. This would provide more validity if there were uniform tests given statewide. I've been pleased with the tests we've used locally. However, a state test would allow us to compare ourselves with other schools with a similar population.

The parent stressed the fact also that she would like to be able to judge the effectiveness of her youngsters' schooling by comparing scores across the state.

If there was a state test, parents would be able to see how well their children were doing in relation to other children across the state.

The student was also in favor of statewide testing based upon comparisons as well.

I'd like to know where I stand compared to other kids in the state. Right now, with all the different tests, you only know how you did in your own school.

The second part of the state versus local control concern was in the area of grade levels. Similar arguments were presented for this issue. There was a predominant feeling among interviewees that the state should set specific grade levels to permit comparisons and statewide monitoring. It was also indicated that definite grade levels would assist personnel at both the state and local level to plan, interpret, and evaluate basic skills programs.

I think the state should tell the towns the specific grades to be tested. I'm in favor of the same test and grade level for everyone. This would make the testing program much more meaningful.

The third part of the state/local dilemma concerned statewide standards. This question also brought forth a strong feeling for state standards. Among the reasons stated by the participants included:

1. Schools need to make more consistent demands on students.
2. Comparisons between communities would be more meaningful.

3. If the state set the tests and the grade levels, then local standards would negate the efforts for standardization.

The state should set guidelines for the cut-offs. The state should look at past test results and decide what would be an appropriate cut-off for the towns. I don't have a problem with the state setting standards. I think they will be fair.

In relation to the entire standardization process (test, grade level, standard), certain words of caution were mentioned by several participants. It was noted that potential political and legal problems could develop. The frequency of parental and student complaints could increase if the standards were set too high. New suits may develop charging the school systems with inadequately preparing students to master the basic skills exam. Some students may become disorganized and become chronic absentees or potential dropouts if the standards were set too high. On the other hand, if standards were set too low, a diminishing of teacher and student expectations may occur. A teaching to the test and a uniform curriculum was also suggested as a danger.

I think a uniform standard will adversely affect the blue collar town. I think it will ultimately force teachers to teach to the test and lead to a uniform curriculum statewide that would inhibit teacher creativity in the teaching process. This will happen if teachers feel threatened that test scores are going to be publicized in the media. I think there should be various standards because of socio-economic differences.

Remedial Services

The next category that was presented to the interviewees related to the type and effect of various kinds of remedial services. Since the intention of the Policy was to hopefully ensure that every student had the opportunity to master basic skills prior to high school graduation, the quality of follow-up services to those students who fail was of critical importance. Once again, the State Department of Education dictates that local school systems implement remedial services, but leaves open to individual systems the choice of kind and degree of reinforcement services.

For the most part, interviewees felt that local school systems, even with state standardization of test, grade, and cut-off were in a better position to implement remedial assistance than the state. Among the reasons mentioned was the fact that individual school systems know their student and staff strengths and weaknesses and should be allowed the flexibility of establishing what kinds of remedial help they felt most appropriate:

In our system, we have Special Needs, Chapter One, Remedial Reading, and individual help by regular classroom teachers. Students who do poorly on basic skills can easily be put into one of those programs. I don't think we need the State to tell us that a student has to go to see the remedial reading teacher three days a week because he failed basic skills. Maybe he will need that, but the school personnel should be able to decide, upon the schools' and students' needs to determine what kind of help he should receive.

The concern over bureaucratic red tape and expense in relation to mandated remedial programs in other areas was also mentioned.

Chapter 766 forces the schools to write individualized educational plans with specific goals for three, six, nine, and twelve months. This must be constantly reviewed and objectives modified. This takes a lot of time and effort which could be used to service students.

Chapter One, although not complex, also demands the completion of many forms. I don't think having a basic skills remedial written plan would be profitable. It would simply be a duplication of other services.

A contrasting position was taken by one participant accentuating the consistency theme. This administrator, although concerned over paperwork, felt that it could be streamlined. By having the state provide funds to school systems to hire trained remedial specialists in reading, writing, and math, he felt that referrals to other services, such as Chapter One or Special Needs may be reduced. Also, if a student transferred from one system to another, the same type of support could be provided.

When asked to describe specific remedial services in Bellingham and to elaborate on their impact, all participants were favorably impressed with the process of support.

All participants were familiar with the various types of remedial services -- the greater degree of awareness emanating from the administrators and teachers. Parents and students were knowledgeable regarding "extra help," but not as familiar with the technical terminology. There

was a strong feeling among all interviewees that the remedial assistance was not only firmly established, but also had provided dividends in terms of scholastic growth. Categories of remediation mentioned by the participants included:

1. Individualized programming within the classroom
2. After-school teacher assistance
3. Remedial Reading
4. Chapter One
5. Special Needs

One administrator pointed to the variety of opportunities available within the Bellingham School System for remediation and focused upon the sequential aspect of it:

The intent of our remedial services for basic skills is to develop a specific and highly individualized educational plan that will provide the student with the necessary skills to pass the test the following school year. Depending upon the extent of the deficiency, the student is eligible for a wide variety of support. For students who only fail the exam in, say, math by only a few points, regular classroom teachers can provide help either during class or after school. Students with moderate difficulties may be assigned to Remedial Reading or Chapter One. Students with chronic and extensive developmental disabilities would be referred to Special Needs.

The referral process and method of documentation were described as well-organized and comprehensive by a teacher:

Once the test results are returned to the classrooms, the teachers have a computerized printout on each students' scores. Based upon the passing score for each subject area, the teacher can easily record from her class list

the students who failed and by how much. The printout also breaks up each major subject area into sub-skills. For example, not only do we receive raw scores, grade equivalents, percentiles, and stanines for the entire skill, but we also know how severe the problem is in phonetics, word study skills, vocabulary, listening comprehension, or inferential comprehension. This information is really helpful in a diagnostic sense. I know which students and what areas I need to reinforce. Also, I know which students should be referred for more substantial help than I can perform along in class. The referral process is clearly spelled out for Special Needs and Chapter One.

The careful monitoring of progress and eventual return to regular class instruction was highlighted by another administrator.

We've gone a step further in terms of follow-up testing than is mandated by the state. The regulations say we only have to test those students who fail at the secondary level. We felt it was important as a precautionary and diagnostic measure to retest at the elementary level as well. Once any student fails at any level specific remedial plans are set into motion. Parents are informed of the type of support their child will receive and quarterly progress reports are conducted. By the time the next testing phase develops, a vast majority of those students who originally failed, pass the follow-up testing. At that point, they are no longer in need of specialized services. Our goal is to provide the least restrictive classroom environment as possible and keep students in the mainstream.

Public Participation

Since the Basic Skills Policy emanated from public concern over the quality of school instruction, it appeared logical to delve into the area of public involvement and information. The researcher wished to explore

with the interviewees their perceptions of public awareness, interest, and knowledge since the Policy came into effect. The statewide Policy suggested that community members participate in the development of basic skills plans and objectives. There were also provisions for each school system to report its test results to its community every year. Did the interviewees feel that this was important and how effective was the Town of Bellingham informing community members regarding policy issues?

In relation to the question of the degree of community involvement in the basic skills process, all participants agreed that input and feedback were important, but were cautious in the amount regarding significant educational decisions. An example of this hesitation was stated by one administrator:

Depending upon the caliber of school committee people elected to serve in that capacity, the effectiveness of community involvement varies. They have a tremendous responsibility to oversee the entire educational program and services offered by the community. Yet, in many instances, I don't believe many school committee people are capable of making the kinds of decisions that are necessary to implement new programs and to oversee curriculum offerings.

This degree of public participation was also questioned by another administrator.

I think the schools were stressing basic skills to a greater extent than people realized ever before the policy. To a degree, the schools became the scapegoat for society's ills. With the passage of basic skills, the public got the notion that they could control the schools. I

think parent input is good, but should be kept at a certain percentage. Parents should not be making important educational decisions. They're not in the building every day and they shouldn't be able to sway the decisions that are made.

Teachers and parents were more vociferous in the rights of the community to be more involved with the decision making process. They felt that the current status of the Policy helps to keep the citizens informed, maintains support for the schools, and creates better public relations. As stated by one teacher:

The public has a right to participate in the decisions surrounding basic skills. We are a public system and the taxpayers are footing the bill for everything we do. They have a right to know. There should be no threat of accountability. As a teacher, I would like to hear suggestions from parents to help students better fit into society.

Another area that was discussed by one administrator concerned the type of public reporting. He felt strongly that given the wide variety of tests used and different cut-off scores, that test results should only be reported locally to parents and the school committee. Test results presented to the state should be kept confidential. Allowing the state to report scores to the media was seen as disconcerting and unfair to many communities.

Although there was a divergence of opinions regarding the amount of input the community should be allowed, there was a consensus regarding the fact that parents and

community members have been given the opportunity to voice their concerns and to receive feedback from test results.

We have had an active Basic Skills Advisory Committee comprised of parents, students, teachers, school committee members, and administrators. They have had involvement from the outset in terms of setting objectives, selecting tests, discussing results, etc.

A parent reinforced the fact that notification of the entire basic skills process was exemplary.

I feel very well informed about basic skills. There are public meetings periodically throughout the school year. A letter is sent home the week before testing is started to inform parents and to make sure students get enough rest. After the testing, a pass/fail letter is mailed home. A detailed narrative report is on file at the child's school and made available to the parent upon request to the teacher.

The student was also complimentary regarding the "awareness" process:

The guidance counselors come into the classrooms and explain the reasons for the testing. I think this makes students more alert and motivated. Our parents get a letter sent home letting us know if we passed or failed. My guidance counselor talks to the kids who fail and tells them about the extra help they will be getting.

Future Changes

As stated earlier, the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy will be modified beginning in September of 1986. The new state plan calls for greater state control, centralization of services, and standardization. The Massachusetts Department of Education realized that with

the wide disparity of grade levels, time of year, tests, and standards there existed minimal hard evidence that students were improving their basic skills after six years of Policy implementation.

Under these new regulations, all students throughout the state will take the same test, at the same time of year (fall). Students will be tested for basic skills purposes in grades three, six, and nine. There will be one cut-off score (standard) for all school systems. Tests will be prepared and scored at the Massachusetts State Department of Education.

Since these modifications represent some radical departures from current procedures, the interviewer solicited from the participants their opinion regarding these new issues. This category comprised several important considerations:

1. Are you satisfied with the present status of the Basic Skills Policy?
2. How do you feel about the proposed changes?
3. How will these changes impact on students in Bellingham?
4. What other changes would you suggest if you were given the opportunity?

In relation to the present status of the Policy, there was a general consensus that, although the town of Bellingham had made significant adjustments in the areas

of curricula, instructional and staff development, perhaps many other cities and towns were not as intensively motivated. Bellingham was viewed by many of the interviewees as susceptible to educational reform and therefore was committed to implementing the Basic Skills Policy in the most effective fashion as possible. As one high level administrator related:

I feel very comfortable with the improvements we have made in our system. We have made an honest attempt to truly provide a "back to basics" philosophy in our schools. We have refined our testing program at every grade level and improved our instruction. This puts us on a good course for the new program. I know that through discussions I have had with administrators from other school systems, they feel quite apprehensive because they have not taken the Policy as seriously as we have.

Another perspective on the present Policy concerned the fact that with only five years of implementation, it was too premature to make changes. It was felt that the schools were beginning to become acclimated to this Policy and now were being forced to change gears:

I don't think the state gave the cities and towns enough time with the present regulations. It took a long time for many people to understand these regulations. I think that changing this now will create even more confusion.

A majority of the participants, however, viewed the new modifications as a positive measure. An assertive position taken by the teaching staff was the fact that teachers on the whole were disenchanted with accusations of inadequacy. Society appeared to be accusing them of

malpractice and using them as a scapegoat for sociological problems. The "toughening" of the Policy was viewed by them as a rebuttal:

If we institute statewide tests and standards, the public will realize we mean business. Teachers are sick of being blamed for not providing enough discipline or letting kids slide by without accountability. With statewide standards, towns won't be able to let kids off the hook.

Meaningful comparisons between cities and towns was cited as an advantage of the new regulations. This would ensure that all districts across the state would meet the same requirements.

This would eventually force reluctant communities to stand up and take notice. Systems that did poorly would be required to seek help from systems that did well. The scores would be available to the public and may ultimately affect real estate transactions. People will not want to move into cities and towns that do not provide adequate basic skills instruction.

Most interviewees felt that Bellingham students would fare well when evaluated in the fall of 1986. They reasoned that the comprehensive testing program, in-service training, past positive test results, and willingness to accept change would be influential factors in making the transition.

Because of the tremendous focus on basic skills education over the past five years in our schools, I feel extremely confident that our students and system will rate in the upper percentiles.

There was skepticism mentioned by one administrator, however, who reiterated concerns over the question of equitability across school systems. He felt that the vast discrepancies of community wealth would prevent fairness in regard to standardization.

If we're going to hold schools accountable for their test results, I think like communities ought to be compared. Systems that don't spend the average per capital state spending should be compared with each other. Wealthier systems achieve more success because they spend more money per capita. Perhaps there should be various standards because of socioeconomic differences.

Participants addressed further areas of change, specifically finances and skills areas. The fact that the state would now assume costs for the development and scoring of tests was seen as an advantage. The present Policy required local school systems to purchase their own tests at the elementary level and pay for commercial scoring services at both the elementary and secondary levels. When the Policy was initiated there was not supposed to be any additional costs to local school systems. Administrators and teachers felt that testing costs were unfairly burdening local systems.

Also in terms of costs, it was noted that the Basic Skills Program was time consuming, both in terms of testing and remediation. Restitution by the State was seen as lacking for administrative costs and record keeping. One participant mentioned Proposition 2-1/2 as

depleting an already "skeleton staff." Testing and remediation by teachers and administrators often detracted from instructional time.

When asked to comment on the new Policy's relinquishing of the requirements for the skills of listening and speaking to be evaluated, there was unanimous approval. Concentration on the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and math were seen as more critical when adopting a statewide Policy.

For the state to undertake this whole new venture, priorities need to be established. I firmly believe in a standard test and cutoff for reading, writing, and math. The areas of listening and speaking are still too vague, time consuming, and open for confusion.

The final area presented to participants addressed their thoughts regarding any other changes not presently adopted. The researcher found that the interviewees were concerned that students in Bellingham were performing well and strongly wanted to be able to assert that the school system was of superior quality. As a small community, with a lower socioeconomic status, participants wanted to demonstrate to the public at large, that concerted efforts had brought about significant educational changes in the right direction. However, without a solid basis for comparison, they understood that people may view their achievements with a jaundiced view. Therefore, not only did there exist a substantial disposition for statewide

tests and standards, but also for graduation and promotion requirements. To put "some teeth" into the new regulations, one participant felt that promotion and ultimately graduation should be contingent upon successful completion of a basic skills test.

In order for us to effectively monitor student growth and achievement, testing definitely needs to occur. We are abandoning our responsibilities as educators and parents if we permit social promotion and graduation. The lessons of responsibility and accountability must occur early and often.

The Survey Data

The purpose of the survey was to assimilate information from members of the four groups (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) other than the ones interviewed. This data was used as a supplement to either substantiate or deny the opinions, perceptions, and descriptions presented by the interview subjects regarding the Basic Skills Policy.

The survey was administered to selected members of the four groups. The process of selection was extensively delineated in Chapter III. In summary, teachers and administrators who were directly responsible for some aspect of Policy implementation were surveyed. This included 53 teachers and 15 administrators. Parents were selected on the basis of their previous involvement with school affairs. Representatives from the three elementary

school districts as well as the high school were mailed the survey. Students who were selected were seniors enrolled in a Psychology course. They had received their entire high school education operating under the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy. As honors students, their perceptions were felt to be more reflective and involved. Their interest in the study of behavior was also taken into consideration.

Return rates from the administrators, teachers, and students were 100% because the researcher was on the premises while the surveys were completed. The return rate for the parents was 80%. The difference was explained because these surveys were mailed home. Cover letters as well as follow-up phone calls were strategies attempted to increase response rates.

Within this section, a complete presentation of the survey data will be formulated. The information that is significantly in accord or discord with the interview data will be highlighted. Additionally, specific questions that were inconclusive because of the large disparity of response will be featured. In order to present a consistent format, the information from the surveys will be analyzed utilizing the same categories presented in the interview section.

Because the surveys were closed, elaboration of information was not feasible. Therefore, an exact match

of questions, with probes, was not entirely possible. Where applicable, similarities and differences will be noted. Since there were two separate surveys, one for teachers and administrators, another for parents and students, relationships will be presented as needed.

Suitability of Establishing a Basic Skills Policy

The interview participants were in strong agreement that a formal program mandating the teaching of basic skills was both necessary and important. This conclusion was substantiated by the respondents to the surveys:

Table 1

Response to the Statement: The Massachusetts Department of Education should require local school systems to have a Basic Skills Policy.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	93%	7%	0%
Teachers	87%	7%	6%
Parent	82%	11%	7%
Students	64%	13%	23%

Although two-thirds of each group concurred that there should be a statewide policy, highest agreement was documented by administrators and lowest by students. The large undecided category for students perhaps reflected their uncertainty on this issue.

The researcher in a separate question to parents and students wanted to determine the awareness level of those groups. Was the Basic Skills Program presenting enough public relations material to determine if the community understood the Policy? Table 2 shows the responses.

Table 2

Response to the Statement: I am aware that the state requires school systems to develop a basic skills program to help students master basic skills before graduation.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parent	89%	4%	7%
Students	87%	3%	10%

With over 80% of both parents and students responding that they were aware of the Policy, the researcher was confident that public knowledge was being adequately addressed.

The survey participants were also questioned regarding the importance of the Basic Skills Policy. Once again, in the interview section, all groups felt that the attention to the instruction of basic skills was of crucial value. This was likewise supported by the survey respondents.

Table 3

Response to the Statement: The Basic Skills Policy is important.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	100%	0%	0%
Teachers	70%	2%	28%
Parent	67%	11%	22%
Students	64%	10%	26%

All four groups were also asked to comment on the amount of time required by these skills and if there was too much emphasis.

Table 4

Response to the Statement: There is too much concern for basic skills.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	0%	100%	0%
Teachers	7%	70%	23%
Parent	4%	89%	7%
Students	10%	55%	35%

This question revealed a large disparity between the teachers and administrators. The administrators overwhelmingly felt that basic skills should receive undivided attention. However, almost a quarter of the teachers were

undecided, perhaps wondering if the emphasis should be downplayed.

Also, parents were more closely aligned with administrators than teachers, reflecting a strong desire to focus on basic skills. Only slightly more than half of the students disagreed that there was too much concern for basic skills. A large proportion of the student group was undecided, perhaps revealing a lack of understanding regarding curriculum emphasis.

Public Dissatisfaction

During the interviews, there was solid concurrence that the public was justified in criticizing the schools for a lack of attention to basic skills prior to the implementation of the Massachusetts Department of Education Basic Skills Policy. This concern was supported by the survey respondents. Their responses can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Response to the Statement: Before the Basic Skills Policy was adopted, the schools were not stressing fundamentals.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	80%	7%	13%
Teachers	87%	6%	7%
Parent	96%	0%	4%
Students	64%	10%	26%

Eighty or more percent of parents, teachers, and students were in agreement that before the Basic Skills Policy was enacted, there was not enough emphasis on basics. Out of the four groups, parents felt strongest, while one quarter of the students were undecided on this issue.

Table 6

Response to the Statement: The public had a right to criticize the schools for not focusing on basics.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	77%	7%	16%
Teachers	66%	30%	4%
Parent	87%	6%	7%
Students	68%	8%	24%

Although over 65% of all respondents agreed that the public was justified in criticizing the schools, the breakdown according to roles provided an interesting phenomenon. Once again, the parents presented an overwhelming expression that the schools should be "taken to task." However, teachers were not as certain. Thirty percent disagreed, perhaps either indicating defensiveness to criticism or a feeling that the schools were already focusing enough on basic skills.

Table 7

Response to the Statement: Changes in society were more responsible than the schools for poor basic skills in students.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	73%	14%	13%
Teachers	87%	6%	7%
Parent	43%	45%	12%
Students	52%	12%	36%

In the interview section, many participants noted the dynamic nature of society over the past decade. Social service requirements, such as drug and alcohol awareness, sex education, etc., were being brought to the foreground in society as a whole. The schools, functioning as subsets, simply reflected the diverse nature of society. In the survey, teachers appeared as the highest category

in relation to shifting the blame on society and deflecting it away from the schools. Parents were equally divided, being unable to conclusively decide where the problem started.

Elementary versus Secondary Focus

During the interviews with the case study subjects, the participants emphasized the feelings that the Basic Skills Policy should focus on both the elementary and secondary levels. Early intervention as well as continuity of service was suggested as reasons for addressing both levels.

Although the explanations were not provided by the survey respondents, the level of emphasis was supported.

Table 8
Response to the Statement: The Basic Skills Policy should
focus on the:

		AGREE
Parents	Elementary level alone	7%
	Secondary level alone	4%
	Elementary and secondary levels together	89%
Students	Elementary level alone	7%
	Secondary level alone	6%
	Elementary and secondary levels together	87%
Teachers	Elementary level alone	13%
	Secondary level alone	8%
	Elementary and secondary levels together	79%
Administrators	Elementary level alone	0%
	Secondary level alone	0%
	Elementary and secondary levels together	100%

Highest agreement was documented by the administrators who unanimously felt that basic skills should be addressed at all levels. Although teachers represented the group with the lowest agreement (79%), it was felt that they wished to have basic skills accentuated at as early a level as possible.

A related issue to the level of focus covered the time frame for remediation. As discussed with the interview participants, early intervention was seen as imperative. The interviewees strongly felt that the key to preventing school failure was rapid detection of deficiencies. Administrators and teachers were asked to respond to the following statement regarding this issue.

Table 9

Response to the Statement: Remediation for weak students should be provided as early as possible.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	100%	0%	0%
Teachers	100%	0%	0%

There was unanimous agreement by the educators that intervention in the primary grades was imperative.

Skills Acquisition

The researcher wished to determine if survey participants felt that the level of basic skills procurement was higher for students as a result of the Policy. Specific skill areas (reading, writing, math) were noted. It was mentioned by the interviewees that gradual, yet perceptible positive changes in skill attainment were noticed. Writing was the skill that brought about the most comment from both the interview and survey respondents.

Table 10

Response to the Statement: Students are learning more because of the basic skills program.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	67%	11%	22%
Students	55%	23%	22%
Teachers	74%	6%	20%
Administrators	86%	7%	7%

Table 11

Response to the Statement: List the basic skills area (reading, writing, math) you feel has improved the most as a result of the Policy.

	Writing	46 entries	87%
Teachers	Reading	5 entries	9%
	Math	2 entries	4%
	Writing	13 entries	87%
Administrators	Reading	2 entries	13%
	Math	0 entries	0%

Several respondents wrote narrative comments in response to these two questions, as a means of explanation. One parent noted, "I think students are performing better in academics. Whether it is the basic skill policy, discipline, more effective teaching, I'm not sure." In relation to writing skills, one teacher stated that, "This area has definitely shown the most dramatic improvement as a result of the Policy."

Effect of the Policy on Teachers and Curriculum

During the interviews, it was mentioned that a shifting of priorities and a refocusing of educational objectives occurred as a result of the Basic Skills Policy. Curriculum renovation through in-service training

was addressed. The stressing of fundamentals was highlighted. The practical use of test results in the teaching process was noted by teachers and administrators. The effect of test results on teacher evaluations was also described. The following statements related to teachers and curriculum.

Table 12

Response to the Statement: I provide instructional activities aimed at the basic skills objectives.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	91%	2%	7%
Administrators	100%	0%	0%

The survey data overwhelmingly supported the notion that teachers are incorporating into their daily lesson plans activities directly related to basic skills objectives.

Table 13

Response to the Statement: I feel the identified basic skills objectives accurately reflect basic skills as I see them.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	74%	6%	20%
Administrators	100%	0%	0%

One fifth of the teachers were uncertain that their perception of basic skills correlated with previously determined basic skills. The fact that administrators are ultimately responsible for the final development of the curriculum perhaps accounted for their unanimous response rate.

Table 14

Response to the Statement: Basic skills should be taught in other content areas as well, such as social studies and science.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	87%	6%	7%
Administrators	93%	7%	0%

Over four-fifths of teachers and administrators took the position that basic skills should not be taught in isolation, but should be integrally addressed by teachers in other content areas. This appeared to strongly support a total "back to basics" philosophy in the curriculum.

Table 15

Response to the Statement: The teaching of basic skills prevents me from teaching higher order reasoning skills.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	7%	79%	14%
Administrators	7%	86%	7%

During the interview, it was determined that teachers did not feel burdened or restricted because of the time and energy necessary to concentrate on basic skills. Over three-quarters of the survey respondents were in agreement that they could devote enough attention to higher reasoning skills in addition to basic skills.

Table 16

Response to the Statement: The current curriculum should be changed in light of the basic skills objectives.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	15%	58%	27%
Administrators	13%	67%	20%

The interview participants strongly felt that the curriculum renovation that had already occurred was sufficient. The survey respondents were not as convinced. One-fourth of the teachers and one-fifth of administrators were undecided in regards to further curriculum modification.

Table 17

Response to the Statement: I am evaluated by my superiors on how well my students perform on the basic skills test.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Teachers	15%	58%	27%
Administrators	13%	67%	20%
Parent	82%	11%	7%
Students	64%	13%	23%

During the interviews, it was stated that initially teachers may have been threatened by test results in the evaluation process. However, with time, it was felt that teachers realized that the results would not in most cases adversely affect their yearly evaluations. Although there was strong agreement in the survey that this was the case, a certain skepticism was noted by the one-quarter percentage who were not quite convinced. This held true for the administrators surveyed as well.

Table 18

Response to the Statement: More time should be devoted to reading, writing, and math rather than other subjects.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	48%	22%	30%
Students	35%	30%	35%

Nearly half of the parents were in agreement that the core subjects of reading, writing, and math should be accentuated. Students were evenly split across agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty. There was a large percentage of uncertainty in both groups in relation to this statement.

Table 19

Response to the Statement: Teachers are spending more time on fundamentals.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	56%	14%	30%
Students	55%	23%	22%

Over half of both parent and student groups responded in the affirmative to this statement on the priorities of instruction.

Table 20

Response to the Statement: There are too many elective courses at the high school.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	44%	19%	37%
Students	13%	77%	10%

There was an overwhelming perception on the part of the students that elective courses were offered minimally. Over one-third of the parents were undecided on

this issue, perhaps reflecting a lack of knowledge of specific course offerings.

Table 21

Response to the Statement: Students are not spending enough time on homework.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	56%	14%	30%
Students	48%	29%	23%

There was a majority perception by both parents and students that more time should be devoted to homework.

Table 22

Response to the Statement: Disruptive students prevent the teaching of basic skills.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Parents	67%	11%	22%
Students	64%	26%	10%

Approximately two-thirds of both parents and students perceived acting out students as inhibitors to the teaching process.

Focus on Basic Skills Testing

The general consensus for the interviews was that the core subjects of reading, writing, and math should take

precedence over listening and speaking. This question was presented to the survey members.

Table 23

Response to the Statement: The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, and math.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	80%	6%	14%
Teachers	87%	7%	6%
Parent	65%	7%	28%
Students	48%	29%	23%

Table 24

Response to the Statement: The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	13%	67%	20%
Teachers	7%	79%	14%
Parents	44%	19%	37%
Students	29%	10%	61%

Survey respondents, likewise, strongly agreed across all role models that the basics of reading, writing, and math should be priorities. As with the interviewees, it appeared that survey participants were mainly interested

in basic subject area skills that could be more readily measured. .

Promotion/Graduation Linkages to Testing

Tying the passage of the basic skills exam to either graduation or promotion was the most controversial issue presented to the interviewees. This was likewise the case with the survey participants.

Table 25

Response to the Statement: Students should be tested in basic skills before being allowed to pass a grade.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	47%	40%	13%
Teachers	77%	17%	6%
Parents	65%	7%	28%
Students	39%	45%	16%

Although they did not have the opportunity to elaborate on their responses, the fluctuations between agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty reflected their ambivalence. As reported earlier, many felt that teacher observation, daily productivity, and grades should be utilized in conjunction with test scores. Conversely, supporters of grade promotion based on test results noted that students should be held accountable each year for

mastery of basic skills and that social promotion was ultimately damaging to students.

Table 26

Response to the Statement: Students should not be allowed to graduate if they fail the basic skills test.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	80%	7%	13%
Teachers	87%	6%	7%
Parents	89%	4%	7%
Students	87%	6%	7%

In relation to graduation requirements, there appeared stronger agreement among all four groups that passage of the basic skills test should precede graduation. In the interviews, proponents argued that responsibility would be developed in students. Opponents mentioned psychological, social, and legal difficulties. Teachers, parents, and students were more solidly inclined to stress test promotion linkage. Administrators, although strongly in favor, contained nearly one quarter of its members undecided on this issue.

Exemptions

The concept of individual differences and accommodations was strongly supported during the interview process. Students who had documented special needs or who

had language barriers were seen as legitimate exemptions for reasons of fairness. Over nine-tenths of all groups agreed that these exemptions were reasonable, in the survey.

Table 27

Response to the Statement: Students with special needs and limited English ability should be exempted from the testing.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	93%	7%	0%
Teachers	91%	2%	7%
Parents	96%	4%	0%
Students	97%	0%	3%

State versus Local Control

The interviewees revealed a vigorous opinion that schools across the state should take the same test. Although all role groups were likewise in favor in the survey data, there was a significant percentage who were opposed. This proved true in respect to grade levels and standards as well.

Table 28

Response to the Statement: All school systems should be required to take the same basic skills test.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	53%	40%	7%
Teachers	55%	28%	17%
Parents	56%	14%	30%
Students	48%	29%	23%

Table 29

Response to the Statement: All school systems should be required to test at the same grade level for basic skills.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	86%	7%	7%
Teachers	70%	7%	23%
Parents	67%	11%	22%
Students	55%	23%	22%

Table 30

Response to the Statement: There should be uniform pass/fail standards for all school systems in the state.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	47%	33%	20%
Teachers	49%	36%	15%
Parents	48%	22%	30%
Students	29%	10%	61%

Remedial Services

In terms of remedial services, there was strong agreement across all groups that students deficient in basic skills should be provided with extra support.

Table 31

Response to the Statement: Students should be given extra help if they fail basic skills tests.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	93%	7%	0%
Teachers	80%	7%	13%
Parents	96%	4%	0%
Students	97%	0%	3%

School personnel were in solid agreement that they were providing supplementary assistance to students who failed the basic skills exam.

Table 32

Response to the Statement: I make special provisions for students who fail basic skills.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	86%	0%	14%
Teachers	79%	13%	8%

Table 33

Response to the Statement: Students are given extra help if they fail the basic skills test.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	44%	19%	37%
Teachers	48%	29%	23%

Parents and students were not entirely convinced that remedial support was actually occurring. Less than half of the parents and citizens agreed that students do receive supplementary help.

Public Participation

In the interviews there existed a general feeling that the public should be involved in the basic skills process since they had initiated the concern over the minimal skills of students. Certain cautious attitudes, however, were noted by school personnel in terms of the

amount of involvement parents should be allowed. Although in agreement on the survey that the public should participate, there were higher degrees of uncertainty and disagreement among teachers and administrators as compared to parents and students.

Table 34

Response to the Statement: The public should be allowed to participate in the Basic Skills Program.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	80%	7%	13%
Teachers	70%	2%	28%
Parents	100%	0%	0%
Students	90%	7%	3%

As far as the reporting mechanism is concerned, there existed considerable disparity between the parents and the other three groups. Parents were strongly in favor of media reporting, while less than half of the administrators, teachers, and students concurred. The highest level of disagreement took place with the teachers who perhaps were anxious about negative reverberations from the press.

Table 35

Response to the Statement: School systems should be required to report the test results to the media.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	47%	40%	13%
Teachers	27%	53%	20%
Parents	89%	4%	7%
Students	35%	35%	30%

Future Changes

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers, parents, and students agree that the process of standardization will prove helpful. Administrators were nearly split in half in terms of agreement and disagreement. They were perhaps more concerned about the social and legal ramifications if many students in the system failed.

Table 36

Response to the Statement: There will be statewide standards next year, meaning that all students in grades three, six, and nine will take the same test, at the same time of year, and be judged according to one passing score. Statewide standards will be beneficial.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
Administrators	47%	40%	13%
Teachers	66%	11%	23%
Parents	67%	11%	22%
Students	64%	10%	26%

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented the data collected from the in-depth interviews with the six subjects of the case study. Additionally, data collected from a survey were described. The survey information included in this chapter were those items of specific interest relative to the primary case study data.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The ultimate test of the credibility of an evaluation report is the response of decision-makers and information users to that report.¹

Need for Basic Skills Programs

Over the past decade, there have been serious questions pertaining to the adequacy of the public schools' presentation of basic skills instruction. Concern over declining test scores and inadequately prepared high school graduates led the public to voice their dismay over the quality of public school education. Employers noted that applicants for positions lacked fundamental skills in both oral and written communication. Society as a whole was disappointed in student preparation and demanded accountability from school systems.

In the mid 1970's, substantial legislative action occurred throughout the country as a reaction to society's frustration over public school education. State legislatures adopted Basic Skills or Minimum Competency Testing Policies to address this concern. By 1980, all fifty states had some type of legislative mandate that required the schools to propose specific educational programs with standards.

The reasons for the decline in attention to fundamental skills acquisition ranged from the adverse effect of television to the erosion of disciplinary control by teachers. Social responsibilities placed on the schools for problems previously addressed in the family were perceived as distractions from basic education. The evolving characteristic of American society from the extended family to the nuclear family led to lesser amounts of psychological support at home. As a result, the schools were being asked to provide within their curricula courses on family development, drug and alcohol awareness, and health education. Increased demands for social service staff, including school adjustment counselors and school psychologists, reflected a shift in priorities within the schools. Elective courses became more available while, at the same time, required courses were de-emphasized.

This phenomenon was noticed as a nationwide trend, not solely isolated or restricted to a certain state or area of the country. Schools were cited repeatedly for graduating students not adequately prepared for either employment or citizenship. Taxpayers were being required to allot significantly larger portions of their tax dollars to public school education without noticing improvement in dividends.

In terms of definition, the basic skills or minimum competency testing policies were means of assessing the impact that curricula instructional strategies were having on student performance. Basic skills instruction was viewed as an entire process of fundamental education, whereas the testing was perceived as the mechanism to evaluate the efficacy of that instruction. State departments of education, through the state legislatures, became the overseers of this process. They realized that simply implementing a periodic assessment procedure would fall far short of a goal of improved student achievement. In order to produce higher quality graduates, comprehensive curriculum, instructional, and staff development would need to occur. Basic skills programs were developed by state department of education personnel and basically fell into one of three categories:

1. Local school systems mandated to adopt completely state run program.
2. Local school systems modify state guidelines to suit individual needs.
3. Local school systems develop their own basic skills programs without state assistance.

Although there has existed a recent thrust for a "back to basics" movement, a review of the literature revealed that as early as 1865, the New York Regents examination was utilized as a means to measure student

proficiency and accountability. The Iowa Every Pupil Test (1929) as well as the General Educational Development Test (World War II) were additional assessment devices operating prior to the current basic skills movement. Denver, Colorado, was the first city (1960) to adopt a test for graduation purposes. Oregon became the first state to pass legislation for minimum competency testing for the class of 1978. Arizona was the first state to link the passage of a minimum competency test to high school graduation. At the national level, the concern has been noted, but a national competency testing program has not been as fully accepted as individual state programs. State direction has been a tradition in education and the United States Office of Education views its role as a facilitator and research provider. Proponents of the basic skills movement have noted a variety of advantages to adoption. Among the more frequently noted in the literature are the following:

1. Accountability in public education will be assured.
2. Diplomas/promotion will be more meaningful, not based upon social criteria.
3. Curriculum focus will be maintained.
4. High school graduates will have academic literacy.

5. Student deficiencies will be identified and remediation will be conducted.
6. Learning objectives will be developmentally sequenced and relevant.
7. Employers will have sufficiently prepared applicants.
8. Students will become more responsible for their learning.
9. All students will be exposed to a core curriculum.
10. Effective versus non-effective classroom instruction will be identified.
11. Statewide data will be available for comparison and analysis.
12. Public school confidence will be restored.

Opponents to basic skills programs point to a number of genuine concerns related to equity and efficiency.

Highlights of their position are as follows:

1. A single test should not be utilized to determine a student's future.
2. Content validity (does the test measure basic skills?) and instructional validity (does the school provide instruction in those basic skills areas that are tested?) are questionable.
3. Standards or cut-off scores may be inappropriate.

4. Providing remedial services to students who fail is costly, time consuming, and, in many instances, a duplication of other services.
5. Accentuating basics may lead to a mediocre education.
6. Criterion referenced tests are difficult to correlate with norm referenced tests.
7. Gifted populations may not be stimulated.
8. Handicapped, minority, and bilingual students may be unfairly treated.
9. Bureaucracy and paperwork may be inordinately increased.
10. The test may dictate the curricula, not vice versa. Teachers may teach to the test.
11. The tests may be used for teacher evaluation purposes.
12. Adverse future economic effects if a student is deprived of a diploma may develop.
13. The dropout rate may increase because students would feel inadequate regarding passing the test.

In order to be successful and to avoid many of the previously stated objections, model basic skills programs established across the country contained certain key components. Effective basic skills programs began with representatives from a cross-section of the community.

Business leaders, parents, students, teachers, administrators, and school committee personnel developed clearly stated goals from the beginning. Whether adopting state programs or initiating their own, a specific set of objectives needed to be developed. Basic skills committees frequently established enabler skills (reading, writing, mathematics) as their areas of focus. Life skills (balancing a checkbook, completing tax return forms, etc.), although ultimately the measure of effective application, were found to be too complicated and expensive to evaluate. The entire community should be involved with the standard setting process and a whole range of acceptable failure rates should be established prior to implementation. Modifications should be consciously made for special populations. In-service training programs prior to program implementation for teachers need to occur. A clearly stated policy that will avoid legal difficulties should be developed. Promotion and/or graduation should not be mandated initially to avoid complications. Decision making should occur at the local level and model programs should be duplicated.

In Massachusetts, the Department of Education implemented the Massachusetts Basic Skills Improvement Policy in 1979. The opportunity to study the advantages and hazards of basic skills programs in other areas of the country, which had experienced the growing pains of the

program, was available. Therefore, many of the pitfalls to be avoided were documented. The Massachusetts Department of Education was able to incorporate many of the positive aspects of other programs across the nation.

The Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy has had a significant impact on the quality of educational instruction in the public schools of Massachusetts.

The purpose of the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy was to enhance students' mastery of basic skills. As originally written, the policy provided for a great deal of local discretion. The Massachusetts State Department of Education was responsible for insuring that local school systems test students and publish their test results annually. However, each district was allowed to plan particular courses of action for curriculum, instructional, and staff development.

Design of the Study

This dissertation attempted to demonstrate the effect of the Policy on one local school district, Bellingham, Massachusetts. The study's primary data was obtained through the use of in-depth interviewing.

Individual interviews were conducted with selected administrators, teachers, parents, and students. A final group discussion was also conducted. The researcher was interested in obtaining from the program developers and

consumers their comprehensive perceptions of the impact of the Basic Skills Policy on the Bellingham School System.

Secondary data was obtained through the administration of an opinion survey. This survey was administered to other parents, teachers, administrators, and students within the town of Bellingham.

The researcher sequenced the portions of the dissertation in the following manner:

1. Individual interviews were held.
2. Surveys were administered.
3. Group discussion was conducted focusing on relevant areas from the individual interviews as well as pertinent data from the survey.

The researcher perceived that a combination of qualitative data (obtained through interviews) and quantitative data (obtained through an opinion survey) would provide more information than either method separately. An interview guide approach, outlining a series of general issues, was utilized in the interview process. This provided both structure and flexibility.

Selection of subjects for the interviews was based upon awareness of the Basic Skills Policy issues as well as ability to effectively communicate. The researcher desired to obtain a cross-section of opinions regarding the Basic Skills Policy.

The opinion survey was developed from the interview guide. A three point Likert-like scale was formulated with categories of "Agree," "Not Sure," and "Disagree." Two separate surveys were developed for educators and citizens because of certain technical information. The surveys were administered under standardized procedures with the researcher in attendance for all groups, except the parents. The parent surveys were mailed home.

This study sought to explain how one school system reacted to the Policy mandates. Information concerning Policy issues in general was obtained, as well as Bellingham's specific response to Basic Skills.

Results of the Study

Results of the study clearly indicate that there is an overwhelming perception that Bellingham had reacted positively to the Policy by pursuing comprehensive curricula, instructional and testing/remediation reforms. These renovations appear to have been a direct result of the Policy.

A gradual, yet perceptible improvement of "hard" data (test scores) was documented by school personnel. Students and parents supplemented this conclusion by observations that the schools were producing better qualified consumers. The staffs surveyed felt strongly that the

local Basic Skills Program has had a positive impact on student growth.

A substantial majority of survey and interview respondents agreed that the schools, before the Policy was enacted, were not adequately preparing students for post-secondary experiences.

Both survey and interview participants strongly favored uniform statewide testing and standards. Teachers also supported grade promotion and graduation based on such tests and standards. Administrators in the interviews noted human, political, and legal problems which could develop with statewide uniformity of conditions.

The total group of people surveyed were generally in favor of the new policy changes, which address more thoroughly the issues of comparability and accountability. Valid comparisons across districts would finally be able to be made. A minority of participants looked with disfavor on inter-district comparisons. They were wary of inequitable and harmful conclusions being drawn given the state's diversity of community wealth and students' abilities.

The citizens and educators in Bellingham placed a high value on a perceived high self-interest in this improved change. They felt confident that the time and effort already spent will produce dividends in the future. Bellingham appears to be a district with a

history of innovation, adaptability, and accountability. In relation to school improvement, it has shown these characteristics in past responses to other changes, such as double sessions, closing of schools, and computers in the classroom. The Bellingham schools have attempted to revise and improve the entire instructional program to achieve basic skills goals. Data from this and other studies indicate that most school systems have to want to adapt to or adopt changes and innovations.

Specific Problem Areas

Need for Basic Skills Programs

In this study, there existed overwhelming evidence that Basic Skills Programs need to be formally established. Left to their own resources, individual school systems would not adopt a prioritized approach to basic skills. Interviewed participants expressed a variety of reasons for establishing programs. Among the major justifications were the following:

1. To assist academically inferior students.
2. To provide curriculum, instructional, and staff development.
3. To provide accountability for the schools and the community as a whole.
4. To provide public relations.

5. To accentuate basic skills instruction in the schools.
6. To certify prior to high school graduation.
7. To stimulate assessment and evaluation at other grade levels.
8. To improve the standards of the school system.

The respondents did not favor local school system discretion but tended to voice strong feelings for a state developed and operated program.

Over 80% of administrators, teachers, and parents felt that the Department of Education should require local school systems to adopt a basic skills policy, corroborating interview information. While 64% of the students were also in favor of a state mandate, this figure was not as high as the other groups surveyed. The researcher speculated that students may not have been as knowledgeable as the other groups in terms of state versus local control.

In response to statements regarding the importance of basic skills in general, there existed a substantial disparity between administrators and teachers. There existed unanimous agreement among all administrators, while only 70% of the teachers felt that basic skills were important.

Public Dissatisfaction

Since the basic skills movement developed as a result of public disenchantment with basic skills attainment of students, this researcher wished to corroborate this fact with his subjects. Interview and survey respondents across all role models concurred. The public was seen as justified in criticizing the schools for a de-emphasis on basic skills instruction. However, it was frequently noted by interview subjects that societal changes on a nationwide basis contributed to this decline in basic skills accentuation. In the surveys, 96% of the parents felt that, prior to the adoption of the Basic Skills Policy, the schools were not stressing the fundamentals, while only 66% of the teachers thought the public had a right to criticize the schools.

Level of Focus

The literature on basic skills stresses the fact that assessment should occur "early and often" in order to identify areas of weakness. To wait until some time in high school before evaluating a student in basic skills neglects the opportunity for intervention in the elementary grades. Those programs that not only test early, but also provide individualized educational planning on a systemwide basis are the most successful. The Policy in Massachusetts demands that testing occur at both the

elementary and secondary levels. Interview respondents across all roles felt that the Policy should be implemented at both levels. Continuity of program planning and monitoring of student progress were noted as particularly significant reasons. A test conscious atmosphere and systemwide accountability were also mentioned as valid explanations for evaluating students in both the elementary and secondary levels. Testing and remediation at early grade levels was felt to be important to identify those students who may exhibit academic weaknesses on a more chronic basis. By testing early and often, respondents indicated that deficiencies in the curricula could be more readily corrected. It was further noted that the current State Policy's emphasis on the secondary level should be modified to devote more attention to the elementary level. These conclusions were substantiated by the survey participants who overwhelmingly felt that the Policy should address both levels and that remediation for weak students should be provided as early as possible.

Teacher and Curriculum Impact

In the review of literature, the benefits of a positive basic skills program for teachers included the fact that teachers would be provided with clearly stated goals, in-service training, and instructional and management information. The disadvantages were stated as

excessive amounts of time relegated to basics, loss of academic freedom, parental pressure, and negative teacher evaluations. In terms of the curricula, a basic skills approach was viewed as more objective with clearly stated priorities. There was also felt to be a closer correlation in basic skills programs between the instructional process and the ultimate test. A strong emphasis on writing and remediation was also apparent in solid programs. On the negative side, a restricted curriculum with a lack of innovation and stimulation was apparent. Coaching and teaching to the test was also viewed as a hazard.

The interview participants were of the opinion that the Policy, for the most part, had a positive effect on teaching. They felt that the curricula and instructional renovations were important and meaningful. The in-service training that had been incorporated in the areas of Reading, Writing, and Testing assisted the teachers in developing more effective strategies in their classroom situations. A consciousness raising for those teachers intimately involved with the test years was seen to occur. However, a generalization to other staff members less involved had not as yet taken place. Teachers were seen as motivated to improve their students' test scores also because of the widespread publicity. In the initial years of the Policy, a more cautious and suspicious

concern over the effect of student scores on teacher evaluations was documented. With the passage of time, this anxiety has been decreased to a level that the staff can tolerate. Teachers in this study also generally felt that the test results correlated with their perceptions of students in their classes and viewed the test results as beneficial in terms of educational planning and placement.

In the surveys, over 90% of teachers felt that they provided instructional activities aimed at the basic skills objectives. While the interviewees did not feel they were being evaluated based upon test results, nearly half of the survey respondents felt that their superiors were using the tests to judge their teaching ability.

Skills Acquisition

The intent of the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy was to insure that every student in the Commonwealth possessed at least minimum skills prior to high school graduation. After five years of Policy implementation, the researcher wanted to determine from the participants their views regarding improvement in academic skills. Both interview and questionnaire participants noted positive changes in scholastic growth. This proved true across all role models. Writing was the specific skill mentioned as most effected by the Policy. In-service training and cumulative writing folders were noted as

important elements contributing to this change. This was supported in the survey with nearly 90% of teachers and administrators perceiving writing as the most improved skill.

Listening and Speaking

The researcher hypothesized that participants would feel that the fundamental subject areas of Reading, Writing and Math should be prioritized, as opposed to the skills of Listening and Speaking. The majority of interview respondents agreed that listening and speaking should be de-emphasized. They also felt that testing in applied areas, though relevant, would be excessively time consuming. Survey respondents also perceived Reading, Writing, and Math as priorities. Over 80% of teachers and administrators thought the policy should focus on reading, writing, and math.

Promotion/Graduation

In relation to promotion, there was a general perception by the interviewees that linking the passage of a basic skills test to grade promotion was harsh. They felt that a single test should not be used in isolation, but that report card grades and teacher observation should be taken into consideration. Daily productivity was seen as more of an indication of a student's acquisition of

knowledge. Individualized learning rates and potential psychological damage were also noted as reasons for not solely emphasizing test scores.

Teachers and parents in the survey reflected the highest percentages in favor of linking the test to promotion. These were the populations that were most in favor of holding students directly responsible and accountable for concepts presented in class. Administrators, concerned over potential political and legal ramifications, presented mixed opinions. Students represented the group that was the least receptive to test/promotion criteria.

In relation to graduation, interviewees presented several arguments in favor of linkage, including the fact that the diploma would become more meaningful, employees would have adequately prepared applicants, the public would be satisfied, students would become more responsible, and remedial efforts more effective. Opponents listed many of the same arguments that were elaborated for the tying of the test to promotion, such as one test should not dictate the outcome of a student's high school career, special populations would be unfairly treated, social and psychological problems would increase. An overwhelming majority of both interview and survey respondents, however, favored graduation linkages.

Exemptions/Remedial Services

Careful consideration for specialized populations was a major concern in the literature. Students with special needs and bilingual populations need to be given modified test conditions or exempted from the process. Fairness and equitability have been mentioned as particular concerns for these groups. There was overwhelming agreement by all groups in both the interview and survey sections of the study that these "special students" should be treated with different criteria. Over 90% of all groups surveyed felt that special needs and bilingual students should be exempted from the policy.

The research also reveals that remedial services should be firmly established for students who fail basic skills. Individualized educational planning should be incorporated into the program that includes a wide variety of options to meet specific student needs. Interview and survey participants all agreed that students should be provided with supportive assistance and that specifically in the town of Bellingham, these services were broad based and effective.

State versus Local Control

The researcher found a general trend toward favoring a state operated and controlled program. Consistency and comparability across school systems were mentioned by

interview participants as advantages. The large disparity of the cities and towns in relation to wealth, size, tax rates, location, and student characteristics was mentioned as an argument opposing statewide standardization.

Statements related to the same test, grade level, and standard were presented to the survey respondents as well. However, results revealed considerable more ambivalence. There was only a 50-50 split across all groups.

Public Participation

The Basic Skills Policy emanated from the public's concern over the inadequacy of students' school experiences. The literature repeatedly emphasizes community involvement and participation not only at the outset of program establishment, but also, throughout program implementation. For the program to accommodate community needs, adequate representation as well as reporting needs to occur. The interview participants felt that the public should be integrally involved, but were cautious regarding the degree of involvement. It was felt that educational decisions should be made by professional educators. Public reporting was also seen as valuable. Interview participants felt that Basic Skills programs were being favorably reported to the public. Survey respondents were strongly in support of public participation, but only

parents supported the reporting of test results to the press.

Changes

The Massachusetts Department of Education has determined that local discretion in terms of tests used, grade levels tested, and standards established for passage of the basic skills tests had not provided an adequate measure at the State level to assess progress in basic skills. Beginning in the academic year 1986-87, there will be statewide standardization of basic skills testing. The majority of interview and survey respondents supported this modification in order to be able to compare students' progress throughout the state. Administrators, as a group, were almost evenly divided, noting possible legal, psychological, and sociological problems with statewide standards.

Recommendations

Based upon this study's results, it is recommended that the Basic Skills Policy continue to be operational. Within the town of Bellingham, it has had a positive impact on curricula, instructional, and staff development. Student achievement as well as school improvement were perceived as legitimate consequences of the Basic Skills Policy. Although grade to grade promotion based

upon passage of the Basic Skills Test appears to be premature, linkage of the Basic Skills Test to the high school diploma appears reasonable.

From this study, it is also recommended that basic skill subject areas focus on reading, writing, and mathematics. These are the core skills necessary to function effectively in society. Ultimately, responsibility for student mastery of basic skills is multi-dimensional. Whenever students pass or fail assessment devices, entire schools and communities share in the results based upon their attitudes and commitments to educational excellence.

The researcher would recommend that duplication studies involving different towns be conducted to allow for more extensive generalization of results. Since this study focused on selected administrators, teachers, parents, and students within a school system with less than 5,000 students, correlations with other school systems with different socio-economic and demograph conditions are limited. To allow for greater utilization of results, studies conducted across similar communities with interviews and surveys, would permit comparisons that would have more significant generalizability.

The researcher would envision such an undertaking to occur at the State Department of Education level. Surveys could be readily developed and administered to local school system personnel. Regional Department of Education

specialists also would be capable of conducting interviews with members of local communities. These results could be utilized to more effectively administer the Basic Skills Program at the state level.

Since the Massachusetts State Department of Education will be administering a standardized Basic Skills Testing Program beginning in the fall of 1986, community comparisons will be more easily discernible.

It is recommended that a study be conducted to analyze the effect of statewide standardization of basic skills test procedures on local school systems. This could be contrasted with current perceptions of local school system autonomy in relation to basic skills testing.

Finally, it is recommended that a quantitative analysis of test results across the state be conducted to assess the impact that the Basic Skills Policy is having directly on student achievement.

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APPENDIX A

BASIC SKILLS SURVEY -- ADMINISTRATORS/TEACHERS

The Town of Bellingham has a Basic Skills Policy which requires students to be tested at certain grade levels. The purpose of the Policy is to improve the quality of education for all students.

YOU ARE BEING ASKED TO DESCRIBE YOUR PERCEPTION IN TERMS OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS. PLEASE INDICATE YOUR ATTITUDE ON EACH ITEM BY CIRCLING ONE OF THE THREE CODES AT THE RIGHT OF EACH ITEM.

		<u>AGREE</u>	<u>DISAGREE</u>	<u>UNDECIDED</u>
1. The Massachusetts State Department of Education should require local school systems to have a Basic Skills Policy.	1.	A	D	U
2. The Basic Skills Policy is important.	2.	A	D	U
3. There is too much concern for basic skills.	3.	A	D	U
4. Before the Basic Skills Policy was adopted, the schools were not stressing fundamentals.	4.	A	D	U
5. The public had a right to criticize the schools for not focusing on basic skills.	5.	A	D	U
6. Changes in society were more responsible than the schools for poor basic skills in students.	6.	A	D	U
7. The Basic Skills Policy should focus on the:				
elementary level alone	7.	A	D	U
secondary level alone	7.	A	D	U
elementary and secondary levels together	7.	A	D	U
8. Remediation for weak students should be provided as early as possible.	8.	A	D	U
9. I provide instructional activities aimed at the basic skills objectives.	9.	A	D	U

10. The teaching of basic skills prevents me from teaching higher order reasoning skills.	10.	A	D	U
11. The current curriculum should be changed in light of the basic skills objectives.	11.	A	D	U
12. I feel the identified basic skills objectives accurately reflect basic skills as I see them.	12.	A	D	U
13. Basic skills should be taught in other content areas as well, such as social studies and science.	13.	A	D	U
14. I am evaluated by my superiors on how well my students perform on the basic skills test.	14.	A	D	U
15. Students are learning more because of the Basic Skills Program.	15.	A	D	U
16. Circle the basic skills area (reading, math, writing) that you feel has improved the most as a result of the Policy.	16.	Reading	Math	Writing
17. The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, and math.	17.	A	D	U
18. The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking.	18.	A	D	U
19. Students should be tested in basic skills before being allowed to pass a grade.	19.	A	D	U
20. Students should not be allowed to graduate if they fail the basic skills test.	20.	A	D	U
21. Students with special needs and limited English ability should be exempted from the testing.	21.	A	D	U
22. All school systems should be required to take the same basic skills test.	22.	A	D	U

23.	All school systems should be required to test at the same grade level for basic skills.	23.	A	D	U
24.	There should be uniform pass/fail standards for all systems in the state.	24.	A	D	U
25.	The public should be allowed to participate in the basic skills program.	25.	A	D	U
26.	School systems should be required to report the test results to the media.	26.	A	D	U
27.	Students should be given extra help if they fail the basic skills tests.	27.	A	D	U
28.	I make special provision for students who fail the basic skills tests.	28.	A	D	U
29.	There will be statewide standards next year, meaning that all students in grades 3, 6, and 9 will take the same test, at the same time of year and be judged according to one passing score. Statewide standards will be beneficial.	29.	A	D	U

APPENDIX B

BASIC SKILLS SURVEY -- PARENTS AND STUDENTS

The Town of Bellingham has a Basic Skills Policy which requires students to be tested at certain grade levels. The purpose of the Policy is to improve the quality of education for all students.

YOU ARE BEING ASKED TO DESCRIBE YOUR PERCEPTION IN TERMS OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS. PLEASE INDICATE YOUR ATTITUDE ON EACH ITEM BY CIRCLING ONE OF THE THREE CODES AT THE RIGHT OF EACH ITEM.

	<u>AGREE DISAGREE UNDECIDED</u>		
1. I am aware that the state requires quires school systems to develop a Basic Skills Program to help students master basic skills before graduation.	1. A	D	U
2. The Massachusetts State Department of Education should require local school systems to have a Basic Skills Policy.	2. A	D	U
3. The Basic Skills Policy is important.	3. A	D	U
4. There is too much concern for basic skills.	4. A	D	U
5. Before the Basic Skills Policy was adopted the schools were not stressing fundamentals.	5. A	D	U
6. The public had a right to criticize the schools for not focusing on basic skills.	6. A	D	U
7. Changes in society were more responsible than the schools for poor basic skills in students.	7. A	D	U
8. The Basic Skills Policy should focus on the:			
elementary level alone	8. A	D	U
secondary level alone	8. A	D	U
elementary and secondary levels together	8. A	D	U
9. More time should be devoted to reading, writing, and math rather than other subjects.	9. A	D	U

10.	Teachers are spending more time on fundamentals.	10.	A	D	U
11.	There are too many elective courses at the high school.	11.	A	D	U
12.	Students are not spending enough time on homework.	12.	A	D	U
13.	Disruptive students prevent the teaching of basic skills.	13.	A	D	U
14.	Students are learning more because of the Basic Skills Program.	14.	A	D	U
15.	The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, and math.	15.	A	D	U
16.	The Basic Skills Policy should focus on reading, writing, math, listening, and speaking.	16.	A	D	U
17.	Students should be tested in basic skills before being allowed to pass a grade.	17.	A	D	U
18.	Students should not be allowed to graduate if they fail the basic skills test.	18.	A	D	U
19.	Students with special needs and limited English ability should be exempted from the testing.	19.	A	D	U
20.	All school systems should be required to take the same basic skills test.	20.	A	D	U
21.	All school systems should be required to test at the same grade level for basic skills.	21.	A	D	U
22.	There should be uniform pass/fail standards for all systems in the state.	22.	A	D	U
23.	Students should be given extra help if they fail basic skills tests.	23.	A	D	U
24.	Students are given extra help if they fail basic skills tests.	24.	A	D	U

- | | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|---|---|---|
| 25. | The public should be allowed to participate in the Basic Skills Program. | 25. | A | D | U |
| 26. | School systems should be required to report the test results to the media. | 26. | A | D | U |
| 27. | There will be statewide standards next year, meaning that all students in grades 3, 6, and 9 will take the same test, at the same time of year and be judged according to one passing score. Statewide standards will be beneficial. | 29. | A | D | U |

APPENDIX C

ABSTRACT FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

A. Abstract describing the use of human participants.

Human participants will be used in two ways:

1. Interviews will be conducted with members of the Bellingham School System and citizens of the town. They will be asked questions regarding the school system's Basic Skills Policy. In addition a survey will be administered to educators and citizens.
2. The rights and welfare of the participants are guaranteed through their voluntary participation. They will not be coerced into answering any questions that they would feel would compromise their values.
3. Participants will be provided with an oral and written explanation of the research methodology. The interviews will be conducted in order to describe and define the perceptions of people toward the Basic Skills Policy. The purpose of the questionnaire will be to supplement the data collected for the interview with the subjects in the case study.
4. Consent will be obtained by asking the participants to volunteer to answer questions regarding the Basic Skills Policy for a doctoral dissertation.
5. Subjects will be divided into categories: administrators, teachers, students, and parents. There will be no direct linkage to specific members. References to subjects will be according to category and not to individuals. No names or references to specific people will be made without their prior written consent.

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORMS

Interview Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to discover and describe the perceptions and attitudes of selected administrators, teachers, students, and parents concerning the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy. The study is being conducted by Frank Connor, a School Psychologist and doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, as part of a doctoral dissertation.

This part of the study will involve the use of interviews. Selected administrators, teachers, parents, and students will be interviewed in order to understand their perceptions of the Basic Skills Policy. All interviews will be tape recorded and will not take more than two hours of your time. Information obtained from the interviews will be categorized according to administrator, teacher, parent, or student. Individual names will not be used. Only the conductor of the study and his dissertation committee will have access to the tapes of the interviews.

Your input will assist in providing valuable insight into the school system's Basic Skills Program. I will be available to answer any further questions you may have regarding my research and you are free to withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time. Please sign the statement below if you agree to participate in this study.

_____ Yes, I agree to participate in this study.

_____ No, I do not wish to participate.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

Opinion Survey Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to discover and describe the perceptions and attitudes of selected administrators, teachers, students, and parents concerning the Massachusetts Basic Skills Policy. The study is being conducted by Frank Connor, a School Psychologist and doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, as part of a doctoral dissertation.

This part of the study will require the completion of an opinion survey which will not take more than one hour of your time. The surveys will be coded and will not require the use of names. Only the conductor of the study and his dissertation committee will have access to the surveys.

The information obtained from this study will be helpful in developing a more effective basic educational program for the school system. In addition to the dissertation, results will be summarized for presentation to the Bellingham School Committee.

Your input will assist in providing valuable insight into the school system's Basic Skills Program. I will be available to answer any further questions you may have regarding my research and you are free to withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time. Please sign the statement below if you agree to participate in this study.

_____ Yes, I agree to participate in this study.

_____ No, I do not wish to participate.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

From: Jeffrey W. Eiseman

October 1985

To: Ronald H. Fredrickson, Dean
Academic Affairs

Subject: Francis Joseph Connor's dissertation proposal

Francis J. Connor proposes to study a basic skills program he is conducting by (1) conducting six two-hour interviews -- one with himself, (2) conducting a discussion among his interviewees, and (3) having those involved with the program's implementation fill out a questionnaire. I have four suggestions:

- that Question 1 of the questionnaire be deleted (an affirmative answer is assumed in Questions 2 and 3);
- that Question 12 have space following it for respondents who believe that the time of year for testing should be changed to indicate during which month they think would be better;
- that Connor conduct the group discussion that is mentioned on page 17 after collecting and analyzing both the interview and questionnaire data, and that it be focused on making sense out of the results; and
- that the interviews be reduced from two hours to 90 minutes (survey researchers have found that going beyond that is usually not very productive; furthermore, the information Connor wishes to gather can easily be collected during that time).

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE BASIC QUESTIONS

- 1a. Overall, do you think that having a Basic Skills Program in this district is a good idea?
- 1b. Is it (the district's Basic Skills Program) an equally good idea at the elementary and secondary levels?
- 2a. Do you think that students here are learning basic skills any better as a result of this district's Basic Skills Program? Which skills? On what do you base your statement?
- 2b. What effects is the Basic Skills Program here having on the school district, such as on the teachers, on the curriculum, etc.? What attempts have been made to enhance basic skills instruction through (a) curriculum modification, (b) in-service training?
3. Is there anything in the current State Basic Skills Improvement Policy that you think should be changed? What? Why?
4. The Policy requires testing in reading, writing, math, listening, and eventually, speaking. Should this be changed in any way?
5. Districts may choose their own tests; should all districts be required to use the same tests?
6. Districts may choose what grades to test within early elementary (K-3), later elementary (4-6), and secondary (7-12). Should all districts be required to test at the same three grades?
7. Districts set their own pass/fail standards. Should there be uniform, statewide pass/fail standards for all districts? Have students and parents in this district been notified about not meeting district standards? Have appropriate teachers been notified about which of their students are non-masters?
8. The Policy does not include grade promotion or graduation requirements based on passing the test. Should it?
9. Districts must establish some kind of follow-up services for students who fail their tests. Should the state specify what kinds of follow-up services are to be provided? What is the nature of follow-up instruction? Are all students who fail receiving follow-up services?

10. Students with severe handicaps or limited English ability may be exempted from testing. Should these exemptions be changes in any way?
11. The Policy requires that the public participate in the local program. Should this be changed in any way?
12. The Policy requires that every district report its test results to its community every year. Should this be changed in any way?
13. Of all the possible changes we have discussed which one seems most important to you to make? Why?
14. Overall, how well informed do you feel you are about this district's Basic Skills Program? What is the source of your information?
15. Has the district made a review of the existing curricula in light of the Basic Skills Policy?
16. How informed do you feel the teachers/parents/students are in regard to the basic skills objectives?
17. Has the district provided staff training to improve instruction in basic skills? In which curriculum areas?
18. Are the students aware of the basic skills objectives?
19. Are the skills tested for basic skills actually taught?

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